

## **Generous Gratitude: Food**

“Feasting in Freedom and Fullness of Being”

Exodus 16:13-21; Mark 6:37-44; Acts 2:44-47

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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### **An Abundance of Generous FOOD!**

What does food and feasting mean to you? When you think back on your life’s “meaningful moments,” do some of those rich memories involve food? Gathering around the table? Think back today, as we give thanks for food and gathering in our lives, of those “holy moments.” Give thanks to our Creator and the one who creates this incredible gift in abundance!

Exodus 16:13-22 The Message (MSG)

<sup>13-15</sup> That evening quail flew in and covered the camp and in the morning there was a layer of dew all over the camp. When the layer of dew had lifted, there on the wilderness ground was a fine flaky something, fine as frost on the ground. The Israelites took one look and said to one another, *man-hu* (What is it?). They had no idea what it was.

<sup>15-16</sup> So Moses told them, “It’s the bread God has given you to eat. And these are God’s instructions: ‘Gather enough for each person, about two quarts per person; gather enough for everyone in your tent.’”

<sup>17-18</sup> The People of Israel went to work and started gathering, some more, some less, but when they measured out what they had gathered, those who gathered more had no extra and those who gathered less weren’t short—each person had gathered as much as was needed.

<sup>19</sup> Moses said to them, “Don’t leave any of it until morning.”

<sup>20</sup> But they didn’t listen to Moses. A few of the men kept back some of it until morning. It got wormy and smelled bad. And Moses lost his temper with them.

<sup>21-22</sup> They gathered it every morning, each person according to need. Then the sun heated up and it melted. On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, about four quarts per person.

Mark 6:37-44 The Message (MSG)

<sup>37</sup> Jesus said, “You do it. Fix supper for them.”

They replied, “Are you serious? You want us to go spend a fortune on food for their supper?”

<sup>38</sup> But he was quite serious. “How many loaves of bread do you have? Take an inventory.”

That didn’t take long. “Five,” they said, “plus two fish.”

<sup>39-44</sup> Jesus got them all to sit down in groups of fifty or a hundred—they looked like a patchwork quilt of wildflowers

spread out on the green grass! He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples, and the disciples in turn gave it to the people. He did the same with the fish. They all ate their fill. The disciples gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. More than five thousand were at the supper.

Acts 2:44-47 The Message (MSG)

<sup>43-45</sup> Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.

<sup>46-47</sup> They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.

### **I. GIVING THANKS FOR FOOD!**

We do a lot of enjoying food around here! Most churches do. Churches that *enjoy* getting together and fellowshiping, anyway! Churches have often joked about the “number of potlucks we have around here,” as if it's something to be embarrassed about!

I'd like to change that perception! What did Jesus do the most with his peeps? They gathered around the table and enjoyed food and wine together! It's not something to be sheepish about. It's something to celebrate!

We're also *generous* with food and reach out in abundance. We don't just fill our own bellies to overflowing. We feed hungry kids every single week through the Backpack Program. We feed people at the Christian Mission, at the Bazaar, at Tells book group and other meetings and gatherings. At our new quarterly congregational gatherings and our wonderful Celtic Retreat last weekend!

And, even then, we don't just keep it for ourselves. VirJeanne and Jean and Norma and Barb and Janet and Rhonda and Ericksons and Stevens and WMS and *many* others *take* food from our gatherings to folks to enjoy and deliver meals to those just home from the hospital or recovering.

Food is pastoral care—from the whole church family. There's nothing more comforting than someone bringing you soup or a casserole or birthday cake when you're resting at home!

So, on this day of giving thanks for food and fellowship—let's give a loud thank you to all who minister through food! Can I get an Amen?! And, “Thank you for the Food!”

Okay, got that covered. And, in just a few minutes, we'll get to put that praise into action and gather around for the Feast!

## II. FENCING THE TABLE

First, I wanted to share a little history about churches and food, because I think we might take for granted how far we've come.

You see, churches didn't always have potlucks. Or Homecoming Feasts, or Social Sundays. More importantly, churches haven't always invited everyone to the table. The fellowship table *or* the Communion Table.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and possibly long before, a practice rose up (and amazingly, is still practiced today in some places!) called "Fencing the Table." Has anyone heard of that before? (I don't mean putting a fence around your picnic table so the deer or the family can't help you with your meal!)

The practice comes out of Scottish Calvinism, where the communion table *literally* had a fence around it, with a gate at each end. The members of the congregation (and *only* the accredited members) were allowed to pass the gate on showing their Communion Token, a specially minted **coin** that served as an admission ticket and was given only to those who were "in good standing."

Now, the way this was taught to us in seminary, this "good standing" was not really about if you were

official on the church rolls, had kept up your pledge, served on a committee, etc, but whether you'd been up to sinning all week long!

Say, you'd been seen at the pub on Saturday night having one too many pints of Guinness, or dancing at the Lariat until the wee hours, or seen fraternizing or flirting (or more!), or hadn't gone to church enough lately.....or.....

Those were some of the reasons you might be deemed *unworthy* to come to the Table of the Lord. It was supposed to be about examining your own conscience and being repentant for sins—a personal decision about "fitness." But, if any of your sins or shenanigans or carousing had been *witnessed*, you'd jolly well better not be approaching the table, cuz they *knew!* It was a fence-out state!

This all came from an interpretation of the Apostle Paul's teaching in I Corinthians, where he gave the warning: "Whoever eats this bread or drinks this cups of the Lord in an **unworthy** manner....eats and drinks judgment to himself/herself, not discerning the true meaning of the meal."

This was taken to mean that, for Paul, the Lord's Supper is both a "cup of blessing" and a "cup of judgment"—depending on the purity and state of the receiver.

### **III. NO FENCING HERE**

Well, thank goodness, we don't "fence the table" around here!

The United Church of Christ and many reformed traditions began practicing Open Communion over the years, and the idea that "all who love God are welcome to the Table" has been the norm. Not even a question of church membership – which is the fencing rule in some churches, even today.

Yes, there are churches today where the minister "fences the Table" as Communion is spread, and only those who have examined their conscience during the service and are deemed worthy *and* are "members in good standing" are invited to partake.

### **IV. ARE ALL WELCOME?**

I wrote an article for the Faith Page in the Chaffee County Times recently, because I have observed something over the years in this community. We have a kind of "invisible fence." An unspoken or spoken barrier that keeps some feeling there's not a place for them to belong.

I wrote the article in hopes of encouraging us all, all year long, to look honestly under the table cloth a bit more. To see and hear from the ones on the margins. To strive a little more intentionally and actively to love and accept our neighbor in radical ways like Jesus did.

I received a note or two challenging my perceptions, but the overwhelming response was relief and

gratitude that *someone* was finally encouraging us to "get real" – to be our authentic selves and welcome others to be the same.

One of the few negative responses was a Letter to the Editor in the Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> paper from a man I didn't know. I *loved* the letter! For, though negative, it opened up the dialogue. We are having the conversation now!

It also gave us some ways to clarify who we are. To *name* our character and define and refine the heart of the matter for our own segment of the community here in this place.

Actually, the writer did the defining for us:

*"[They] adopt the secular position that all lifestyles are equally embraceable and acceptable to God."* Meaning we at CUCC and Grace Church and other churches like us *don't* hold "strong convictions about God and His Word."

I'd say we sure *do* hold strong convictions! And, we *do* take that "secular position" that all children of God are acceptable to God and fully welcome at the Table and in our church – just as we are. And this is based on the "biblically sound" words of Paul in Galatians 3:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

In modern day language, we might put it:

“No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

Not, “come as you are, but change!” The letter writer says what Christ says (and thus churches *should* say is “Come as you are, but don’t *stay as you came*.”

Well, I got *news* for you. Christ doesn’t say that! The Bible doesn’t say that! It *does* say:

<sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11)

#### **IV. CAVEAT OF KINDNESS**

The Letter to the Editor concludes with this line: “*Those who stand for nothing will fall for anything.*”

I believe he’s saying that those who don’t put up a fence and stipulate who is acceptable to God and who isn’t, don’t stand for anything.

Hmmm...

I thought about that for a while. The UCC is often criticized for its extravagant welcome and open-minded approach to faith and theology, with the words: You’re an ‘anything goes’ church! You don’t stand for anything!”

Turns out, we *do* have one stipulation about belonging here, and joining us at the table. I’ll call it the “Caveat

of Kindness.” A la Mr. Rogers, our modern-day prophet. We welcome everyone who welcomes everyone else, and loves kindness. And lives it.

“There are 3 ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind.” (Fred Rogers)

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“Love isn’t a state of perfect caring.

It is an active noun like struggle.

To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, here and now.”

(Fred Rogers)

We cannot “come as you are” and not practice kindness—not extend welcome to others just as we are welcomed. For, if we are not practicing kindness to others, then this cannot be a **safe** place and space for all. Truly welcoming means safe for *every* soul to *bring* their soul here, and trust that it will be cherished, honored and loved.

Being our true and authentic selves and bringing all of us and who we are to the table, to the feast, to the community, to the family. When we bring our authentic and kind selves, we allow others to do the same.

*That's* what we stand for. It's not a "liberal agenda;" nor a conservative platform. Not partisan political propaganda. It's the Gospel.

And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.

<sup>46-47</sup> They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.

#### **V. "Feasting in Freedom and Fullness of Being"**

Thanks be to God for food! Our physical and spiritual hungers can be filled! In this place and many other tables. Thanks be to God for *all* the places manna is provided and shared; loaves and fish are multiplied and given to *all* in abundance.

Come to the feast! Come as you are! All that you are. Expect to be changed. Not your core identity—a beloved child of God—that can't be changed. But, you will be changed in ways you can't even imagine! Because you will find yourself welcomed, held, accepted and loved deeply—*just the way you are!*

Even when having a bad day, or a bad week. Or, even a bad year! You are welcome here. Come to the Table of Grace. No Fence. No Coin needed. No change required.

The only thing asked of you is to receive grace and extend that kindness to everyone else.

Give as you have received. Generously and gratefully. As we deepen and broaden our generosity, let us *stand* for something—loudly and courageously—not hiding behind fear or locked doors or veneers of welcome.

Let us *dismantle* fences! Invisible or not. *Anything* that bars *all* children of God from coming to the table of grace. Let's *break down the walls* with love, as that incredible song Beth brought to us says.

Thanks be to God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, who fills all our hungers with abundant love, grace and food. Let's eat! Amen.