

EIGHTEEN

The Meal

A family is a group of people who eat the same thing for dinner.

—Nora Ephron

THE FIRST THING THE WORLD KNEW ABOUT CHRISTIANS was that they ate together.

At the beginning of each week they gathered—rich and poor, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, women and men—to celebrate the day the whole world changed, to toast to resurrection. While each community worshipped a bit differently, it appears most practiced communion by enjoying a full meal together, with special prayers of thanksgiving, or *eucharisteo*, for the bread and wine.³⁹ They remembered Jesus with food, stories, laughter, tears, debate, discussion, and cleanup. They thanked God not only for the bread that came from the earth, but also for the Bread that came from heaven to nourish the whole world. According to church historians, the focus of these early communion services was not on Jesus' death, but rather on Jesus' friendship, his presence made palpable among his followers by the tastes, sounds, and smells he loved.

“With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “[Jesus] did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do—specific ways of being together in their bodies—that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself . . . ‘Do this,’ he said—not *believe* this but *do* this—‘in remembrance of me.’ ”⁴⁰

So they did.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching,” wrote Luke, “and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . . All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need . . . They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God” (Acts 2:42–47).

They were a ragtag bunch, for sure. The pagan writer Celsus

dismissed Christianity as a silly religion, fit only for the uneducated, slaves, and women.⁴¹ Indeed, sociological studies indicate most of the people drawn to the church in its first three centuries came from the lower echelons of society. Women, especially widows, found a home and occupation within the church, leading some to criticize it as too “effeminized” (proof that some things never change). There were strange rumors, too, rumors about purported love feasts that involved eating flesh and drinking blood—a mystery some said explained why Christians were so quick to take in orphans! But the religion of women and slaves continued to grow, even after its adherents were thrown to beasts in the arenas. In fact, persecution only seemed to grow it more.

Their unity wasn't always perfect, of course. In one of his letters, the apostle Paul offered a rather scathing correction to Christians in the church at Corinth who were apparently holding private, drunken feasts for the wealthy while the poor in their community went hungry. “My brothers and sisters,” he pleaded, “when you gather to eat, you should all eat together” (1 Corinthians 11:33). The *Didache*, or *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, instructs Christians to settle their quarrels with one another before partaking of the meal. In some communities, the custom arose to send a piece of bread from the communion service at the bishop's church to other area churches to be added to the meal as a symbol of the bond of unity between all Christians.

Things changed when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of the state and infused the Eucharist with imperial pomp and elements of pagan ceremony. Prayers grew more stylized and fixed. Solemn chants replaced the familiar hymns, vested processions the mealtime banter. Christians no longer gathered around crowded tables but instead stood before altars of stone over which only priests could preside.⁴² It was before the altar at Hagia Sophia that a cardinal from Rome read the sentence of excommunication that split in two the eastern and western churches. By the Middle Ages, many laypeople received the Eucharist only once a year.

Things changed again amidst the tumult of the Protestant Reformation. Some radical reformers dispensed with formal communion altogether and returned to the shared meals. Others

kept elements of the tradition but shifted the focus of Sunday worship to preaching and teaching. Many rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ in communion), but could not agree on the exact manner of Christ's presence in the sacrament. Wars were fought and books were burned. You know how it goes.

Today the meal is known by many names—mass, holy communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper—and is practiced in a myriad of ways. For some it marks the climax of every weekly gathering, for others it is observed just a few times a year. The bread might come as a hot loaf straight out of the oven, an oyster cracker nestled in the palm, or a thin wafer consecrated by a priest and placed directly on the tongue. The wine may be served from an ornamental chalice, a bottle passed around the table, or in rings of little plastic cups. (The wine may, in fact, be grape juice.)

The atmosphere might be celebratory or somber, the room filled with organ music or guitar strums, Gregorian chants or clinking silverware. In more liturgical traditions, the prayers are as familiar as the taste of the bread—"Let us lift up our hearts! We lift them up to the Lord!"—while in a Baptist church or a Bible church, the pastor may simply ask a member of the congregation to say grace.

The elements and the meal are identified in different ways: the body of Christ, broken; the blood of Christ, shed; the Bread of heaven, the cup of salvation, the mystery of faith, the supper of the Lamb. But in every tradition I know, someone, at some point, says, "Remember."

Remember how God became one of us? Remember how God ate with us and drank with us, laughed with us and cried with us? Remember how God suffered for us, and died for us, and gave his life for the life of the world? Remember? Remember?

"On those days when I have thought of giving up on church entirely," writes Nora Gallagher, "I have tried to figure out what I would do about Communion."⁴³

Indeed it's easier to remember things together than alone.

As a child, I regarded communion with trepidation. Though we marked it on the first Sunday of every month, seeing the silver plates stacked on the table at the front of the sanctuary always

surprised and unnerved me. Our church had no confirmation process, so the timing of one's first communion was left to the discretion of one's parents. I hated having nothing to do while, in the silence following Pastor George's solemn recitation of Christ's words from the Last Supper, I could hear everyone in the room chewing, swallowing, and gulping down their oyster crackers and grape juice in one loud cacophony of ingestion. When I finally got the nod from my mother to go ahead and partake, I was so horrified by the sound of my own loud chewing, which rang like a garbage compactor in my ears, that I took to slipping the oyster cracker under my tongue and letting it dissolve through the rest of the service so as not to disturb the entire congregation with my clamorous manducation. To this day I have to remind myself to actually eat the thing.

It was the Anglican tradition that reconnected me to the beauty of the Eucharist, as it does for so many. I once visited an Episcopal church in Louisville, Kentucky, where the entire sanctuary was built around the table. It sat right in the center of the sunlit room, on a raised, circular chancel, surrounded by pews forming a semicircle on one side, and by the choir, lectern, and pulpit on the other—the perfect visual expression of the eucharistic thrust of Anglican liturgy.

“Whoever comes to me shall not hunger,” we sang before circling the table together. “And whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

“The gifts of God for the people of God,” said the priest, as she raised the bread and wine above her pregnant belly. “Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on Christ in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.”

While our various ceremonial remembrances of the meal may be meaningful in their own right, it's a shame they aren't accompanied more often by actual feasts, complete with bread baskets and wine bottles, elbows and spills, cleanup and candlelight, and big fat serving bowls of mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and fresh green beans. For many, such feasts are a staple of their informal church life—those planned or impromptu gatherings around Chinese takeout or a backyard grill when the people of God just hang out together—but the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular is a Western construction, and one I suspect those first

disciples of Jesus would find a bit curious given what we know about those first Sunday meals.

At a church called St. Lydia's in New York City, pastor Emily Scott is trying to change that. On Sunday and Monday nights, crowds of around thirty gather together in a storefront in Brooklyn to cook and share a meal together. Affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, this "dinner church" brings together ancient Christian practices with modern, urban living.

The service begins with the lighting of candles and the singing of hymns. Some in the group already know one another; others are strangers, at least at the start. In the kitchen, the main course—often a vegetarian soup or stew—simmer on the stove. After the hymns, a pastor leads the group in a sung eucharistic prayer from the earliest days of the church. Each person stands around the giant table with hands lifted. "As grain was scattered across the hills, then gathered and made one in this bread, so may your church, scattered to the ends of the earth, be gathered and made one in your commonwealth . . ."

The pastor breaks a hot loaf of bread and sends the two pieces around the table. As the bread is shared around the room, the participants say to one another, "This is my body. Remember."

Then the meal is served. Holy food for holy people. The conversation picks up as introductions, stories, jokes, and drinks are shared. Sometimes the discussion flows freely. Other times it is awkward. Always, it is interesting.

After the meal, a deacon or pastor reads Scripture and preaches a brief sermon, before inviting congregants to share their own stories around the theme. Prayers and petitions are made. And then, at the end of the meal, the group blesses the cup.

"Remember, Lord, to deliver your church from all evil and teach it to love you perfectly. You have made it holy; now build it up and gather it from the four winds into the realm you have prepared for it . . ."

The rest of the evening is filled with washing, rinsing, drying, and storing the dishes as guests work together to clean up. Worship concludes with a hymn, offering, and light dessert. No one leaves a stranger.

“We do church this way because people are hungry,” Emily explains. “People in New York have hungry bellies that may be filled with home-cooked food. They have hungry souls that may be filled with holy text, holy conversation. And these hungers are sated when we come together and eat.

“We do church this way,” she says, “because people are looking for Jesus. People are looking for Jesus and thinking that just maybe they see him, but then again maybe not. But when we sit down together and break bread, we glimpse him for a moment in one another’s eyes and say to each other, ‘I see Christ at this table; I see him when we sit down together and eat.’ ”⁴⁴

The gospel of Luke recounts a story in which two of Jesus’ disciples encountered a stranger on the seven-mile stretch of road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. When he asked why they appeared so downtrodden and anxious, the disciples told the stranger about the events that had transpired in Jerusalem that week, about how their Teacher had been betrayed, abandoned, crucified, buried, and—according to some dubious rumors purported by the women—brought back to life again. As the stranger walked with them, he explained how these things represented a fulfillment of Scripture. But it was not until they arrived at Emmaus and shared a meal together that the disciples realized the stranger was more than a fellow journeyman or prophet. When he broke the bread and gave thanks, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31). It was Jesus!

Something about communion triggers our memory and helps us see things as they really are. Something about communion opens our eyes to Jesus at the table.

As I was editing this chapter, a beloved aunt died suddenly from a staph infection that spread to her spine without warning. A healthy and active seventy-two-year-old, she had just returned from a Mediterranean cruise with my uncle when what began as backache left her totally paralyzed and on life support within hours. I caught a plane to Iowa to grieve with family and friends, all of us numbed by shock. As we gathered at my aunt and uncle’s home, the doorbell rang every few hours as another member of First Baptist Church showed up with a casserole of cold cuts, fresh fruit and bread, homemade ice cream and pies of every variety—a veritable

cavalcade of Iowa home cooking. (In Iowa, by the way, Jell-O is considered a salad.) Over these meals, we found the strength to cry, to share memories, to express our disbelief, and to laugh deeply and loudly as my cousin Michael recounted the time he and his best friend snuck into the church's bell tower and replaced the tape of recorded chimes with AC/DC's "Hell's Bells."

"That's the lady who served us communion at church this morning," my dad said, as a woman stood in the doorway, wrapping my uncle in a hug with one arm and balancing a stack of Tupperware in the other.

"And here she is, serving it again," I replied.

Like Gallagher, on the days when I contemplate leaving Christianity, I have wondered what I would do without communion. Certainly nonbelievers can care for one another and make one another food. But it is Christians who recognize this act as sacrament, as holy. It is Christians who believe bread can satisfy not only physical hunger, but spiritual and emotional hunger, too, and whose collective memory brings Jesus back to life in every breaking of the bread and pouring of the wine, in all the tastes, smells, and sounds God himself loves.