

## TWENTY-ONE

### Open Table

*You are loved, someone said. Take that and eat it.*

—Mary Karr

WHEN SARA MILES WAS FORTY-SIX, SHE WANDERED INTO an unfamiliar church, ate a piece of bread, and took a sip of wine. Until that moment she'd had no interest in religion. Traveled, liberal, and lesbian, she was raised in a secular home and remained deeply skeptical of what she'd seen of the church, particularly its more fundamentalist iterations. She'd never been baptized, never read much of the Bible, never prayed the Lord's Prayer. But at St. Gregory's of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, someone invited Sara to the table.

"And then something outrageous and terrifying happened," she says. "Jesus happened to me."<sup>50</sup>

Sara felt dizzy, overwhelmed, charged with life, filled. Suddenly, she believed.

"I couldn't reconcile the experience with anything I knew or had been told," Sara writes in her memoir, *Take This Bread*. "But neither could I go away: For some inexplicable reason, I wanted that bread again. I wanted it all the next day after my first communion, and the next week, and the next. It was a sensation as urgent as physical hunger, pulling me back to the table."

So with the bewildered support of her partner and daughter, Sara went back to St. Gregory's—the next Sunday, and the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that. Not only did she convert to Christianity, she devoted herself entirely to "a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored."<sup>51</sup>

Sara partnered with St. Gregory's to create a massive food pantry, where the poor, elderly, sick, homeless, and marginalized from the community are served each week from the very table where Sara took her first communion—no strings attached, no questions asked. With the saints painted on the walls looking on,

hundreds gather around the communion table to fill their bags with fruit, vegetables, rice, beans, cereal, bread, canned goods, peanut butter, and whatever happens to be in the five-to-six-ton bounty of food that particular Friday. Many become volunteers themselves, joining church staff for a meal together at noon.

The food pantry recalls a conversation Jesus once had with a group of religious leaders at the home of a prominent Pharisee. “When you give a banquet,” Jesus said to his host, “invite the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.” He told them a parable about a man who prepared a banquet and invited many guests. When those on the guest list declined to attend, the man instructed his servant to go into the streets and alleyways in town and bring back the poor, the hungry, the handicapped, and the lonely. The servant obeyed, but told his master there was still room at the table. “Then go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come,” the master said, “so that my house will be full” (Luke 14:12–23). This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there’s always room for more.

“Holy communion knocked me upside down and forced me to deal with the impossible reality of God,” Sara writes. “Then, as conversion continued, relentlessly challenging my assumptions about religion and politics and meaning, God forced me to deal with all kinds of other people . . . I wound up not in what church people like to call ‘a community of believers’—which tends to be code for ‘a like-minded club’—but in something huger and wilder than I had ever expected: the suffering, fractious, and unbounded body of Christ.”<sup>52</sup>

Not surprisingly, Sara advocates for what’s called an open table, the practice of inviting all who are physically or spiritually hungry to participate in communion, regardless of religious background or status. Most churches maintain some requirements regarding who may partake of the bread and wine—typically, that they be baptized—a tradition adopted early on in the church’s history, but which would have excluded Sara from that first powerful Eucharist experience and which would leave out many of the poor and sick she serves.

Though I have never been part of a church that hosts an open table, I'm with Sara on this one. I don't know exactly *how* Jesus is present in the bread and wine, but I believe Jesus *is* present, so it seems counterintuitive to tell people they have to wait and meet him someplace else before they meet him at the table. If people are hungry, let them come and eat. If they are thirsty, let them come and drink. It's not my table anyway. It's not my denomination's table or my church's table. *It's Christ's table.* Christ sends out the invitations, and if he has to run through the streets gathering up the riffraff to fill up his house, then that's exactly what he'll do. Who am I to try and block the door?

Long enshrined traditions around communion aside, there are always folks who fancy themselves bouncers to the heavenly banquet, charged with keeping the wrong people away from the table and out of the church. Evangelicalism in particular has seen a resurgence in border patrol Christianity in recent years, as alliances and coalitions formed around shared theological distinctives elevate secondary issues to primary ones and declare anyone who fails to conform to their strict set of beliefs and behaviors unfit for Christian fellowship. Committed to purifying the church of every errant thought, difference of opinion, or variation in practice, these self-appointed gatekeepers tie up heavy loads of legalistic rules and place them on weary people's shoulders. They strain out the gnats in everyone else's theology while swallowing their own camel-sized inconsistencies. They slam the door of the kingdom in people's faces and tell them to come back when they are sober, back on their feet, Republican, Reformed, doubtless, submissive, straight.

But the gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, "Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk." This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry.

The compulsion to keep a pure, homogeneous table is an old one, reflective of ingrained social customs and taboos that surround communal eating. The English word *companion* is derived from the Latin *com* ("with") and *panis* ("bread").<sup>53</sup> A companion, therefore, is someone with whom you share your bread. When we want to know about a person's friends and associates, we look at the people with

whom she eats, and when we want to measure someone's social status against our own, we look at the sort of dinner parties to which he gets invited. Most of us prefer to eat with people who are like us, with shared background, values, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, beliefs, and tastes, or perhaps with people we want to be like, people who make us feel important and esteemed. Just as a bad ingredient may contaminate a meal, we often fear bad company may contaminate our reputation or our comfort. This is why Jesus' critics repeatedly drew attention to the fact that he dined with tax collectors and sinners. By eating with the poor, the despised, the sick, the sinners, the outcasts, and the unclean, Jesus was saying, "These are my companions. These are my friends." It was just the sort of behavior that got him killed.

The apostle Peter continued this pattern, but took it even further by daring to dine with Gentiles. As a Jew, keeping kosher was tantamount to Peter's very faith and identity, but when following Jesus led him to the homes and tables of Gentiles, Peter had a vision in which God told him not to let rules—even biblical ones—keep him from loving his neighbor. So when Peter was invited to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, he declared: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28). Sometimes the most radical act of Christian obedience is to share a meal with someone new.

The Right Reverend Michael Curry, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, tells the story of a young woman who became an Episcopalian in the 1940s. One Sunday, she invited the man she had been dating to join her at morning services. Both of them were African American, but the church they attended that day was all white, and right in the heart of segregated America. The young man waited in the pews while the congregation went forward to receive communion, anxious because he noticed that everyone in the congregation was drinking from the same chalice. He had never seen black people and white people drink from the same water fountain, much less the same cup. His eye stayed on his girlfriend as, after receiving the bread, she waited for the cup. Finally, the priest lowered it to her lips and said, as he had to the others, "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." The man decided that any

church where black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be a part of.

The couple was Bishop Curry's parents.

Communion, Curry says, "is a sacrament of unity that overcomes even the deepest estrangements between human beings."<sup>54</sup>

"Participation in the Lord's Supper," writes Richard Beck, "is an inherently moral act. In the first century church, and in our own time, people who would never have associated with each other in the larger society sit as equals around the Table of the Lord . . . The Eucharist, therefore, is not simply a symbolic expansion of the moral circle. The Lord's Supper becomes a profoundly subversive political event in the lives of the participants. The sacrament brings real people—divided in the larger world—into a sweaty, intimate, flesh-and-blood embrace where 'there shall be no difference between them and the rest.' "<sup>55</sup>

I would be lying if I said I relished this "sweaty, intimate, flesh-and-blood embrace" without reservation. Sure, I'm happy to pass the bread to someone like Sara Miles or the neighbor who mows our lawn when we're out of town. But Sarah Palin? Glenn Beck? Those gatekeeper types I was just talking about? Not so much. On a given Sunday morning I might spot six or seven people who have wronged or hurt me, people whose politics, theology, or personalities drive me crazy. The church is positively crawling with people who don't deserve to be here . . . starting with me.

But the table can transform even our enemies into companions. The table reminds us that, as brothers and sisters adopted into God's family and invited to God's banquet, we're stuck with each other; we're family. We might as well make peace. The table teaches us that faith isn't about being right or good or in agreement. Faith is about feeding and being fed.

Perhaps this is why so many of Scripture's most powerful eschatological visions include images of feasting. "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples," declared the prophet Isaiah, "a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines" (Isaiah 25:6). "People will come from

east and west and north and south,” Jesus said, “and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). John’s vision at Patmos climaxes with the declaration, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” This heavenly banquet includes “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language . . . Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst” (Revelation 19:9; 7:9, 16). Christians believe the fulfillment of God’s dreams for the world—the *eschaton*—is marked by a feast in which no one is hungry and all who gather are companions.

In my struggle to find church, I’ve often felt that if I could just find the right denomination or the right congregation, if I could just become the right person or believe the right things, then my search would be over at last. But right’s got nothing to do with it. Waiting around for right will leave you waiting around forever.

The church is God saying: “I’m throwing a banquet, and all these mismatched, messed-up people are invited. Here, have some wine.”