

Food Fight

sermon digest

April 3, 2011

Luke 14:1, 7-14, 15:1-2

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Serious research by Mathew Feinstein, a Northwestern University medical student, turned up on the evening news last Friday. In a study of coronary disease factors in young adults, Feinstein discovered that people who participate regularly in religious activities were twice as likely to become obese by middle age than their more secular peers. Although numerous studies have also shown that religious people tend to live longer, food seems to be the indulgence of choice for believers. The issue here is whether weightier people are more likely to attend church or church activities are fattening. Feinstein insisted that the church is on the cause side of the equation. The problem has more to do with religious activities and attitudes related to food.

The news media had a heyday. ABC ran the story under the heading: "Faith and Fat." CBS reported, "We don't recall any of the commandments saying, 'thou shall eat chocolate cake.'" The *LA Times* ran the story under "Pray It Ain't so." In response, one secular reader seemed to have the answer, "It's simple: folks who don't believe in physical cause and effect (i.e. science) are more likely to go to church and more likely to overeat. Praying to get thin doesn't work; diet and exercise do." A defender of religion wrote, "The church doesn't make people fat, but they may be more welcoming to people who are." I always find the speculation about religion from people in science to be amusing, if not well-informed. Director of Yale University Prevention Research Center Dr. David Katz noted that the social aspects of religion almost invariably involve food and feasting. Then he took a wild leap into theology, suggesting that the focus on an afterlife may be a distraction from healthy practices in this one. He seemed certain that religious people are more passive about health, believing that their destinies are preordained. Sociologists Krista Cline and Kenneth Ferraro believe that ethical prohibitions against practices like smoking and drinking leaves gluttony as the chosen vice. I wonder, are Episcopalians are less likely to gain weight than Baptists and Pentecostals?

Food has sacramental significance. No doubt, food is central to the practice of religion both as social and as sacramental events. Typical religious celebrations are feasts, and even normal weekly activities like our Wednesday meals with church friends are essential to being church. We are reminded that the center of worship dating to the New Testament was the Holy Eucharist, a re-enactment and celebration of the Passover Seder by Jesus and his disciples on Thursday of Holy Week. Even with this sacred meal Paul has to admonish Corinthian Christians about gluttony at the Eucharist. Was this a potluck preceding the sacrament? The scientific health study connecting weight and religion may have been preempted by no less than the Apostle Paul.

Barbara Brown Taylor ("Table Manners," *Christian Century*, March 11, 1998) notes that what you eat and with whom you eat were critical matters in the Jewish culture that produced our Gospels. Eating was less the means to tend physical hunger, the daily nutrition to maintain life, or the fuel for work than a religious event, a celebration of faith that included very specific rules and regulations in preparation of the food, ritual cleansing before eating, and the protocol of seating order at the table. A proper Jewish meal bore no resemblance to the typical fast-food family in our world. The Jewish meal was something of a worship service and a statement of inclusion, and we must add, exclusion.

New Testament scholar Scott Bartchy noted that everyone in the world of Jesus expected meals to be exclusive occasions in which rank and honor were carefully defined by seating order and distinct differences in the food offered. Even everyday meals were complex events in which fundamental social values, class boundaries, and religious values were reinforced. Coming together to eat became the occasion for inclusion in which one was identified as a part of a family or communion of like-minded and socially identical people (*The Social Setting Jesus and the Gospels*, 176ff).

Stories about dining events and sharing food were pivotal landmarks on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem leading up to the gathering of Jesus and his disciples to celebrate the Passover the week of his death. Protestants who have positioned the Eucharist as a secondary sacrament to preaching need to be reminded that *the table came before the cross*. Symbolism in the Lord's Supper gave meaning to the bread and the cup that would forever remind the church of the high price of sacred love. But the path to the Eucharist was not exactly a high road of perfect harmony.

Food is the center of controversy. Jesus comes across in the Gospels as a rebel, intentionally

offending people with his table manners. John the Baptist, something of a recluse and social pariah, dined on wild locust and honey. He fasted and refrained from wine, so he was accused of harboring a demon. Jesus, on the other hand, came eating and drinking; the same critics declared (Luke 7:34), "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

A large portion of the Gospels is a running battle over dining manners, social connections at the table, and the symbolic meaning of food. Every time Jesus dines, whether with a low-life tax collector like Zacchaeus or a respected Pharisee like Simon, the meal seems to become a point of controversy. On the one side, Jesus is criticized for eating with the wrong crowd; he associates with sinners and even eats with them (according to the critics in Luke). On the other side, when Jesus accepts a dinner invitation from the right people, like Simon, he still gets criticized for associating with the wrong people. When a woman from the street comes in washes his feet with her tears and anoints them with perfume, Simon is certain that no real prophet would allow such a woman to touch him. So the meal conversation becomes the center of theological conflict over forgiveness and an opportunity for a parable on forgiving debt.

The 1978 movie "Animal House," a parody on campus life in the 1960's, connected with my fourth-grade sense of humor. Although the movie was rated number one in 1979, it is pure slapstick with no socially redeeming qualities. John Belushi and his fraternity was the target for expulsion by the university president, and Belushi was the disgusting example of the group known on campus as "animal house." Belushi yells "food fight!" at lunch and turns the state-of-the-art university cafeteria into a food-throwing pig pen.

The conflict with Jesus in the in the Gospels is lacking the comic qualities of "Animal House"; however, the magnified attention to minutia by the Pharisees and scribes takes on the role of straight-man defending the institutions of religion, while Jesus plays the part of the out-of-bounds rebel turning all of the conventions into chaos—food fight!

The occasion is a dinner in the home of a Pharisee. Jesus becomes Mr. Manners, giving advice about where to sit so as not to be humiliated by the host. In typical Jesus fashion, simple lessons on every day life carry a double meaning connecting to the Kingdom of God in the conclusion of history. So, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Jesus advised his host when preparing a banquet to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—people who cannot repay you; and he illustrated his teaching with a parable. A host is snubbed by friends and associates, the right people to invite to a banquet. So he sends out an invitation to street people. The conclusion, "none of those who were invited will taste my dinner," is a warning about the big banquet at the end of the game where God is the host and the proper people get left behind.

But Luke is not done. After dinner with the Pharisee and lessons on table manners, the Scribes and Pharisees grumbled that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. They viewed Jesus as the John Belushi of religion making a mockery of their social caste system. Mealtime with Jesus became a living parable of the grace of God, where everyone was welcome at the family table.

You are welcome. The scene repeats itself in churches all of the time. Churches have their unwritten dress codes and rules of inclusion and exclusion. People tend to sit in the same place with the same familiar friends. They are discombobulated by difference. Barbara Brown Taylor pictures Jesus at the Huddle House sitting down with "an abortion doctor, a child molester, an arms dealer, a garbage collector, a young man with AIDS, a Laotian chicken plucker, a teenage crack addict, and an unmarried woman on welfare with five children by three different fathers." Then enters the local ministerial association. They join hands and pray and stare at the odd bunch across the room. Jesus should know better than to hang out with the wrong crowd, but Jesus is not exclusive even towards the ministerial association. Jesus will sit down to eat even with Pharisees. Everyone is welcome at his table. You can almost hear the words he speaks in the parable of the Last Judgment: "I was hungry and you gave me food. . . a stranger and you welcomed me."