

Befriending the Body of Christ

August 8, 2021

Dinner Party

One of my favorite things to do in the summer is host dinner parties. I say “in the summer,” because this tends to be the time that there are fewer church meetings, so I have a little bit of time on my hands that I wouldn’t otherwise.

In reading today’s scripture readings, I’m recalling a dinner party I hosted years ago. I was living in a really neat turn-of-the-century, third-floor walk-up on Milwaukee’s west side. There were floor-to-ceiling windows on which I had hung airy white curtains that would billow in the breeze, and I love to set a table with pretty dishes and flowers and candles.

Because I know so many interesting people, one of the joys of dinner parties is bringing together a mix of people who I think would hit it off. And, as the name of the party implies, dinner is the centerpiece. I’m always careful to ask guests if they have food allergies or sensitivities, and then work to create a variety of options that will delight.

At this particular party, I went with a middle eastern theme and made a homemade olive tapenade, homemade hummus, and homemade crackers to go with them for the appetizer. Because it was August, and therefore hotter than Hades, I grilled all sorts of vegetables that morning and chilled them — peppers and eggplant and zucchini, onions and carrots, and had a platter of grilled chicken as well. I made caponata and my favorite couscous dish and this amazing garlicky herb dressing, and rounded out the meal with baklava made with local honey and pistachios.

Are you getting hungry yet?

Knowing that people often don’t tell you about their dietary requests, I’m careful to make sure that dressings are on the side, and that there are low carb and gluten-free options, so even people who don’t want to come across as being picky can still find something to enjoy.

With all of this care and energy (and, I’ll admit, work) that I put into this party, I have to say, I was kind of put off when I noticed that one of my guests didn’t eat. At all.

Once I noticed, I paid a little more attention, and realized that he took a little bit of several items, rearranged them on his plate from time to time, but I didn’t see him raise his fork to his mouth once. I was kind of offended. After most of the guests left, my best friend stuck around to help clean up, and she and I tittered about how rude the non-eater had been.

Fast forward 20 years, and now I have a totally different perspective on what happened that night. Having learned more about body dysmorphia and eating disorders and especially how prevalent these are within the LGBT population, my take on my guest’s

behavior is now one of compassion. He was probably in torture, all of that food around him, all of those eyes on him.

The Scriptures

One of my favorite ways to engage our Gospel passage today in which we hear Jesus talking about being the Bread of Life is to fall back on that age old truism, “you are what you eat,” to weave together “Jesus is the Bread of Life” and “you are what you eat” to inspire people to BE like Jesus, to consume Jesus, and then allow all of who he is, his healing, his justice, his wisdom, to course through our veins and become what we are and do. But this year, as I reflect on the Bread of Life, for some reason, I’m haunted by the guest at my dinner party who was so hurting that he couldn’t get himself to consume beautiful nourishment served with love.

And so, as we contemplate Jesus’ offer to nourish us and become as intimate with us as the food we eat, it becomes clear that our relationships with our own bodies are part of how we live our faith, too.

Poet Nayyirah Waheed writes:

So complicated, these relationships to our bodies, to ourselves...
We are taught to be so harsh. so unrelenting. so unkind.
How weary the flesh.
How ready the healing...
and so i said to my body. Softly.
‘i want to be your friend.’
it took a long breath and replied
‘i have been waiting my whole life for this.’

Friends, in offering to be the Bread of Life for us, in offering to be our nourishment, part of what Jesus is saying to us is that our bodies are good, and sacred, and worthy, that we, with our cellulite and thinning hair and oddly shaped toes, are made in the image and likeness of God. That it is the divine that courses through our veins, and when we look into the mirror, it is the sacred staring back at us. What if living the Gospel this week means, as Waheed writes in the poem I just shared, that we say to our bodies, “I want to be your friend.” And our bodies take a long breath and reply “I have been waiting my whole life for this?”

Tandem

There’s a fascinating article in this Friday’s edition of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel about the restaurant owner and chef Caitlin Cullen who gave away over 115,000 meals amidst the pandemic. What started out as an effort to make sure the perishable food that her restaurant, called Tandem, had on hand didn’t go to waste when they had to close down in March turned into an elaborate network of both feeding the hungry and also keeping other restaurants afloat. As I said, it’s a fascinating article, I encourage you to look for it.

She clearly has a passion for food and for feeding people, but now, after all of the stress of the pandemic, she’s not only not reopening her restaurant, she’s giving it away. She

says that running a restaurant is too stressful, and that she's conscious that her coping mechanism in times of stress is a bottle of liquor, and so she's decided, for her mental health, to walk away, and give away the restaurant.

Talk about being the Bread of Life! She gave away 115,000 meals, (that's 23 times what Jesus did in the feeding of the 5,000) and now she's befriending her body by doing what is healthy for her body and soul.

Conclusion

Friends, as the church invites us to spend this entire month contemplating Jesus as the Bread of Life, this week, I encourage you to think and pray about how God is offering to nourish and heal your physical being. In doing so, my prayer is that you'll break bread with an old friend.

May it be so. Alleluia and amen.

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