

Stay With Me: The Power of Sustained Connections
Dinner with Friends...and Others
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I am part of a group of friends that has been having dinner together once a month for the last 21 years. We call it our ‘Gourmet Group’. Enjoying good food and our moderate cooking skills were definitely part of our focus when we started. But really, it was friendship we were working on. And now the group has turned into something else altogether. We have watched over and cared for each other through divorces and deaths, job changes, some pretty significant illnesses; our children’s graduations and marriages and addictions; and, from time to time, our big mistakes. We’ve traveled together, decided not to travel together any more, and then tried it again. These eight people are like family to me, and they are one of the great blessings of my life.

We met each other at church.

I know there are groups around this church too, that have a similar or even longer staying power. Even if it’s not a group you could name, many of you have met at this church the people you think of as your closest friends, people you share your life and holidays and family celebrations with. They’re the people who make you feel, regularly, like you are not alone. I’m not quite ready to say that meeting friends like that is right reason to come to church—it sounds a little too much like a country club to me—but it can indeed be one of the benefits of finding a church community where you feel like you belong.

If you have a group of friends that feels like family to you, I would bet you a tidy sum that the activity that draws you together most of the time, more often than anything else, involves eating. Sharing a meal.

Eating together is a very human thing. It is also a very Christian thing. The very first Christians got together not to worship in the way we now think of as ‘church’. They met for meals. They gathered in houses, and they spent whole evenings together eating and talking. The meal that’s symbolized here at this table we pull out and set up once a month—they did it every day. It wasn’t a ritual; it was a potluck dinner. It wasn’t somber; it was joyful, and fun. They often invited strangers to join them, and often those folks came and they stayed—whether it was for food, or conversation, or just so they wouldn’t have to go home alone.

The house-churches that Paul wrote his letters to—including the letter to the Corinthians we read from this morning—had inherited Greek culture. So usually their dinners had two parts: a shared meal, and then a discussion—always with wine—that they called the ‘symposium’. This is how the sequence of words in the communion sacrament have come to us. We say ‘when the supper was over, he took the cup’ because in those early homes, the practice was for food to come first, then wine. The meal, then the symposium. Wine was paired with conversation, not food.

Gradually, in Christian settings, the political and philosophical discussions of Greek symposia developed into what we now would call a sermon. But in those early days, it was always a discussion, an exchange of ideas and insights and stories. Maybe more like what we do in Conversational Church every Sunday, where we listen to one another and know that we are creating the message of the day together, in what each of us hears from God and what we hear from one another.

As those early Christians ate together, sharing their food was part of sharing their resources. But gathering for dinner wasn't only about putting nutrients into their bodies; it was about learning to be attentive and present, the way Jesus was. And while they did this with each other, they were practicing being attentive to the world. I read recently that one of the historical factors that accounts for the dramatic growth of Christianity in those early centuries is that when a plague swept through parts of the Roman Empire, and people fled the cities to avoid being infected, the Christians stayed. They saw their cities getting hollowed out, and so they stayed to nurse their neighbors. They shared their dwindling food supplies. They stood by while their friends died. It was a sort of an ultimate form of hospitality. And the result, this history suggested, was that people saw in those early Christians a generosity and warmth of spirit that made them want to attach themselves to that community, sometimes simply out of gratitude.

If you go back just a little farther in the tradition, to the stories of Jesus himself, what we see is that much of Jesus' teaching took place over meals. A writer named Robert Karris wrote a book he called *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*. He identified fifty different references to food, forty-five different words related to eating. Our picture of Jesus might be more accurate, he suggested, if we imagine him wiping crumbs out of his beard.

Food. Shared meals are woven into every corner of our religious tradition. Perhaps you have heard Jewish friends say that there is a theme that explains every Jewish religious celebration: 'They tried to kill us; we won; let's eat.' Passover, the most important holiday of the Jewish year, is a meal. Communion, the central ritual of the Christian tradition, is a meal. The one miracle that all four biblical accounts of Jesus share, and some tell two or three times, is the scene of Jesus making a meal on the side of a mountain out of just a little bit of food, feeding thousands of poor and hungry people who just a minute before thought there wasn't enough to go around.

The need for sharing meals might be even more acute today than it was then. It's been estimated that twenty percent of American meals are eaten in the car, mostly a single driver eating alone. This is part of a picture the philosopher Charles Taylor calls "disenchantment." We live in a disenchanted world, he says; where many people live as though each of us is a solitary individual, alone in the cosmos—as if there is no choice about this. We are defined most of all by our individuality; we are self-determined, self-reliant. That's the attitude that dominates the Western world, he says; and because of it, we live more and more detached from God, and closed off from one another. Twenty years ago, Robert Putnam observed this in a book called *Bowling Alone*. That was before the invention of Netflix, and iPhones. Since then, we are, if anything, more isolated, more lonely, more addicted to technology, less inclined to depend on regular friendship, and even daily family connections.

I would imagine all of that might be even more true for the thousands of young adults who live near us in Silicon Valley than it is for you. Pastor Sam is away this weekend celebrating her one-year wedding anniversary, but if she were here, she would tell us that every day, as she talks with young working people in Mountain View, she hears someone say that no matter how busy they are, the thing they miss is something that feels like a neighborhood, a group of people with whom they can really be seen and loved and accepted—not for what they accomplish, but for themselves.

That's the longing that our Front Porch ministry addresses. When they invite people to dinner in their driveway on Sunday evenings, Sam and Kristie are welcoming them to come in out of their loneliness, the isolation that long hours of work and overuse of technology can bring. Over dinner and conversation, the stories of Jesus lead them into talking about their own lives, and then what it means to care for each other. They're creating a reliable place, a promise to find each other again, and to stay with each other. Here they can show up carrying all the worry they've accumulated during the week and lay it down, because here it is met by grace, a tangible reminder that we are loved long before we put on the armor of our achievements, our earnings, our devices, our responsibilities.

In a world where we mostly glance off of one another with quick and shallow interactions, a regular gathering over a meal prepared by human hands promises *sustained connection*. And that's the very first piece of our church's new vision statement, one of the ways we think this church can help build a community where life flourishes for everyone. It's first because that—the making and sustaining of connections with one another—may well be the promise that comes most naturally to this congregation. This is what you do, what I have seen you do so often. Not only in relationships with each other, but in your steady, long-term commitment to the work of Hope's Corner, in reliable partnerships with the non-profit organizations who come here on the second Sunday of every month, in friendships with the Muslim women of Pacifica Institute, in regular financial support of students at Africa University.

These are not just connections; they are *sustained* connections. They change the world because they change people. Perhaps this is the practice we are called to bring, and bring more of, to this valley. Some have called it 'radical ordinary hospitality'. (Rosario Butterfield, in *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*) We're calling it, simply, the act of neighboring.

What if our work as a church in these next few years ahead is to both deepen and widen those connections? To actually see the people who live around us, and then make and fulfill a promise that we will look out for their needs too? I imagine that sharing meals—and I mean that both literally and figuratively—is what our life together might look like—not only on our campuses in Los Altos and Mountain View, but standing at our kitchen counters and sitting around dining room tables at home. That those gatherings will be not just for our families and closest friends, but people we've never thought to invite. That our tables will be places of grace and welcome and mutual looking-after, where our neighbors will find food and friendship and a picture of life that flourishes.