

CREATING COMMUNITY WITH FOOD



“*W*hat was going on last night?” a mother in my congregation asked her teenage son after hearing a vigorous discussion in her living room late the night before.

“Oh, we had the best discussion,” her son replied. “But everyone thought I was crazy.”

“What were you talking about?”

“I said that when people sit down and eat together, something happens; something more than just the food. Everyone else said, no, you just order a pizza and eat it. What’s so great about eating together?”

This son, raised in the Church and in a family that values shared meals, had caught a glimpse of the profound sense of community that sometimes emerges when people gather around food. His conversation with his friends reflects another reality more common today: eating as refueling. While broken bread and a cup shared around a table evoke the relationship between God, people and the earth, a vending machine is an apt symbol of the opposite: eating as refueling. Packaged and processed items, each an individual choice and a single serving, appear at the press of a button with no root, leaf, or human hand in sight.

This unit on creating community with food operates on several levels. For some of us, simply finding time to share a table with our own household is a challenge. Food has become a matter of refueling in between meetings, sporting events, and other commitments. If we have fallen into a vending machine

lifestyle, we may need to focus on sharing food and fellowship with those closest to us. Taking the time to eat together as a household or have treasured friends over for a meal may be the nourishment we need most. If no one is home and there is no island of warmth around the kitchen table, it is difficult to engage in the more challenging forms of hospitality that cross social boundaries and welcome strangers.

For those who already have a rich communal life related to food, this unit offers the opportunity to reflect on the previous units on nutrition, hunger, and the environment and connect them to group life. Do our ways of eating together express what we most want to pass on to our children and grandchildren? How can our shared meals support our commitment to good nutrition? How can they respond to the brutal facts about hunger in the world and its underlying problems? How can we eat together in ways that remind us of our ties to the earth that feeds us? Ways that demonstrate respect for all of creation?

For those who are ready to go one step further, this unit also challenges us to embark on the kind of food sharing and community-building that is most distinctively Christian: hospitality to the stranger, the least of these, and the enemy. Throughout history, both friends and foes of Christianity have noted this odd willingness to cross social boundaries at the table. Some say it is what got Jesus crucified.

PREPARING FOOD

Preparing food is sometimes a burden, but it can also be a spiritual discipline, a joyful expression of creativity, and an act of love.

Luke 10:38-42



These verses give us a snapshot of the hospitality Jesus depended upon throughout his ministry. While most meals in the Gospels just appear on the table, in this story, Martha tells us the truth: hosting an itinerant preacher with

a dozen disciples is a lot of work! More than one host must have gone weak in the knees when the Jesus academy appeared on the doorstep. We hear most often about the disciples who traveled with Jesus, but his ministry would have been impossible without the disciples who stayed home and cooked.

The story of Mary and Martha can be read as a contrast between the contemplative and active modes of life. Jesus' defense of Mary makes more sense, however, if we read his comments as a critique of conventional gender roles. The phrase, "sat at the Lord's feet" means to study with a rabbi. Mary, whose role should have been serving supper, is commended for sitting and thinking. Meanwhile, the male lawyer whose story precedes this text in Luke is told to go and do as the Good Samaritan did, tending and feeding a sick man.

Housework is an inevitable part of hospitality and sometimes a roadblock to sharing our table. Who among us wouldn't have guests more often if it didn't require the "many tasks" that troubled Martha? Most of us can identify with Martha's distraction: the temptation to worry over matters of housekeeping rather than focusing on human beings. Therefore, it is worth our while to reflect on ways to handle the nuts and bolts of hospitality so they do not sabotage our attempts to create community around our tables. We can find ways to simplify, share, or sanctify meal preparation. Some people who have learned to cook well tell us that time in the kitchen preparing for guests is pure joy and their primary art form.

From Our Own Times



"Once, while leading a Bible study class on the story of Zacchaeus, I asked a group of college students to plan the menu they would serve if Jesus were coming to their house. A North American woman said she would

whip up a meat loaf. This was an easy dish for her and that would allow more time to focus on visiting with Jesus. A Korean man had a totally different perspective. He and his wife would cook for days in advance, he said. He lovingly described the elaborate dishes they would prepare for such an honored guest. We left the group stunned by the contrast these two answers had provided for us. Both were valid; both revealed the essence of the people who had shared and the cultures they had come from. Talking about preparing food gave us a holy moment together and new insights into what it means to share a table."

- A lay leader in Columbus, Ohio

Faith in Action Step



Some of the best visiting occurs when guests and hosts work together to prepare and clean up a meal. Invite guests for an informal pitch-in meal this week. Plan a menu that can employ a number of hands, such as one that requires chopping or peeling vegetables. Accept all offers of help to clean up.

FEASTING

Feasts are a way of passing on faith because they are abiding vessels for memories.

**Exodus 13:3-10, 23:14-19,
Luke 15:11-32**



A feast is any meal that is rich in memory. Sometimes, elaborate recipes call forth these memories by forcing us to give time and attention to the celebration at hand. Sometimes, they are called forth by a period of abstinence

that accents the abundance of food. Sometimes, a feast reminds us of our link with the earth and the rhythm of the seasons. And occasionally, a feast is a dramatic exclamation point that creates memory by its sheer, joyful extravagance.

Feasting as remembering our past: Food is a language for passing on history that is too precious to travel merely in words. In some feasts, such as the Jewish Seder meal instituted in the book of Exodus, memories are made explicit by liturgy. Children are assigned to ask the ritual questions each year: Why is the family eating bitter herbs and unleavened bread? In order to remember slavery and God's powerful deliverance, they are told. Other meals have power to evoke history as well, but may not be so explicit. In the Kingsolver story below, a food as simple as an orange contains a meaning so rich that extravagance pales in comparison.

Feasting as remembering our link with the land: In earlier days, feasts were tied to the harvest. Harvest festivals like the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Booths in the Hebrew Bible celebrated the gift of certain crops and offered a portion of them to God. A good feast is the logical response to sudden abundance. Today, our feasting is not constrained by the rhythm of the seasons and this is a loss. A feast of food fresh from the ground, at the peak of its flavor, has much to teach us about our dependence on the earth and the goodness of the created order.

Feasting as a container for love: The feast in the well-known story of the prodigal son is not a tradition; it is an extravagant exclamation point. It says "I love you" in a way that mere words never could. How could that wayward child ever forget the taste of marbled beef after weeks of eating pea pods? He must have known how rarely his father killed a fatted calf.

Feasting is the opposite of eating as refueling. It is sharing food in ways that celebrate what is most important in life and most worth remembering.

From Our Own Times



"My grandfather Kingsolver used to tell me with a light in his eyes about the boxcar that came through Kentucky on the L&N line when he was a boy — only once a year, at Christmas — carrying oysters and oranges from the coast. Throughout my own childhood, every year at Christmastime while an endless burden of wants burgeoned around everybody else, my grandfather wanted only two things: a bowl of oyster soup and an orange. The depth of his pleasure in that meal was so tangible, even to a child, that my memory of it fills me with wonder at how deeply fulfillment can blossom from a cultivated ground of restraint."

- Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2002, p. 118.

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Faith in Action Step

Evaluate the feasting traditions in your family. What meanings are carried in your special meals? Are there memories you long to pass on which could be expressed with food? Is there a "harvest" feast of any sort? Start a new tradition.

RECEIVING HOSPITALITY

By receiving hospitality, we recognize and value what others have to offer.

Luke 10:1-12



The cookbook, *Extending the Table*, includes an anecdote about two North Americans and Salustiano Lopez, a Toba Indian and church leader from the Argentine Chaco area.

The U.S. couple asked him, “How should our mission and service organizations begin to share the gospel with other indigenous people?” Mr. Lopez paused for a moment and said, “I would go and eat their food.”

In today’s text, Jesus sends his forerunners out to eat the food of any household willing to offer them hospitality. They are not to take money or luggage; simply to go and offer peace to the house that takes them in, cure the sick, and announce that the kingdom of God has come near. This is not a strategy commonly practiced by agencies today, but perhaps it should be. To refuse to be on the receiving end of hospitality is arrogance. Eating the food a host offers communicates trust and acknowledges the value of what others have to give.

Jesus uses the image of a rich harvest to describe the communities his followers will enter. Note the images he uses. He does not call these towns eroded fields that need fertilizing, not drought-stricken, spindly plants that will die without the laborers’ irrigation, not fig trees that need pruning. Instead, the word is *harvest*. Think acres of wheat with fat golden heads. Think laden olive trees. What would happen if we thought of our hosts, however unlikely, in these terms? What if we looked for the harvest in their lives?



From Our Own Times

“Persons who have never experienced need or marginality, or who are uncomfortable with their own

vulnerability, often find it easier to be hosts than guests. Sometimes they insist on taking the role of hosts, even in the domain of another. Giving the appearance of generosity, they reinforce existing patterns of status and wealth and avoid questions about distributions of power and resources. They make others, especially poor people, passive recipients in their own families, churches, or communities. Recipients of such ‘hospitality’ thus become guests in their own house.

“I witnessed a powerful expression of this phenomenon when I regularly attended a mission church. Although there was potential for some leadership from within the congregation, the resources almost always came from outside. One holiday season in particular, I watched with deepening dismay as waves of well-meaning suburban congregations came to the mission to help — they provided dinners, brought gifts, and led the worship programs. There was, in fact, nothing that the local congregation needed to do. Everyone assumed that the local people had nothing to offer. They had become guests in their own church building. And despite the festive trimmings, disempowerment would be a generous description of what had happened.”

- Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 119.

Faith in Action Step

The next time you are a guest, take pains to savor your host’s hospitality. Write a thank-you note to a friend acknowledging his or her gifts, or thank a stranger who received you graciously in a restaurant, hotel, or other public setting.



OFFERING HOSPITALITY

Sharing food with outsiders is one of the ways we encounter God.

Matthew 25:31-46



While most dinner invitations are given with the expectation of mutual benefits and return favors, Christians have been known throughout history for their practice of sharing food with strangers, the poor, and the sick.

Christine Pohl, who explores this idea at length in her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, cites a grumbling quote from Emperor Julian (A.D. 362). Hostile to Christianity, he is nevertheless embarrassed by the fact that Christians care “not only for their own poor, but ours as well.” Sociologist Rodney Stark claims that the Christian habit of nursing and feeding the sick was the main reason the Christian faith survived its first few centuries. When deadly plagues ravaged Roman towns, most citizens fled, leaving the dying to their fate. Christians stayed behind and cared for the stricken. This courageous behavior cost some of them their lives, but it also brought grateful converts to the faith.

A persistent theme in many of the stories of hospitality that have come down to us is the idea that God is present in the stranger and in those in need. “Whatever you’ve done for the least of these, you’ve done for me,” Jesus says in the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. These words, along with Abraham’s entertaining angels in Genesis 18 and Jesus’ humble birth in a stable, have motivated generations of Christians to provide warm and personal hospitality to people others did not value.

From Our Own Times

The reading below describes Las Posadas, an Advent tradition that takes place each year in the Mission District of San Francisco and in many other Hispanic neighborhoods.



“...Each Advent, the young and the old reenact the story of Joseph seeking lodging for his young wife, Mary, who is weary from travel and heavy with child. For nine nights in a row, children and adults assume the identity of the weary couple or of the innkeepers, processing around the inside of the church or throughout the neighborhood, moving from one designated site to the next...

“...For eight days, the scene is reenacted. Finally, on the ninth day, the evening of Christmas, Joseph’s request moves the heart of an innkeeper, who offers the young couple all that he has left — a stable.... In an outpouring of joy and festivity, those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph in song and dance, food and drink. Candy and treats from the piñata shower the children, and the community recalls anew how the stranger at one’s door can be God in disguise.

“Every December, Hispanic communities relive in their flesh the Gospel truth that ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us.’.... In Las Posadas, they ritually participate in being rejected and being welcomed, in slamming the door on the needy and opening it wide. They are in this way renewed in the Christian practice of hospitality, the practice of providing a space where the stranger is taken in and known as one who bears gifts.”

- Ana Maria Pineda, “Hospitality,” in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, pp. 29-31.

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Faith in Action Step

Today’s smaller households make it more difficult to share food with outsiders. They lack the flexibility and porous boundaries of the large tables of long ago. Band together with another household to offer

hospitality to a group or person you might be reluctant to take on alone.



MAKING PEACE AROUND THE TABLE

Sharing food is a powerful symbol of reconciliation and good will. To risk eating together is an act of discipleship and — sometimes — an alternative to violence.

John 13:21-30, Matthew 14:1-21



There are times when the opposite of table fellowship is not just hunger; it is violence. Choosing to share a meal can be a radical act of peacemaking. The Lord's Supper, where Jesus knowingly ate with his betrayer, was one such meal. Judas'

presence at the table puts a challenging twist on the words, "Do this in remembrance of me."

The feeding of the five thousand is another occasion where violence skirts the edges of a meal. Many of us may picture a happy, middle class picnic where the absent-minded parents all forgot to pack a lunch. More likely, the people were chronically hungry, not just empty at the moment. From what we know of the political oppression of the times, this crowd had more of an agenda than a free, continuing education class. Several clues in the text support this interpretation. In both Matthew and Mark, the story of John the Baptist's brutal murder at the hands of King Herod comes directly before the feeding of the 5,000. In Luke, we are told that Herod is looking for Jesus and this is why he has withdrawn to a deserted place. This suggests that the crowds that followed Jesus out into the wilderness were seeking a way to respond to the military dictatorship they lived under, which had recently beheaded a popular figure. Five thousand *men* is not just a crowd; it is a potential army. In fact, five thousand is the number of soldiers in a Roman legion. When Jesus blessed, broke and gave bread, he may have been serving a mob on the edge of riot. No wonder he suggested they sit down!

John ends his version of the story by noting that Jesus slips away because the crowd is about to "take him by force to make him king." This closing comment reminds us that the feeding of the five thousand was not just a nice gesture; it was an expression of Jesus' deliberate decision not to bring in his kingdom with a sword. Instead of marshalling a zealot army, he gathers bread and fish from a child and

feeds the whole crowd. His compassion averts what could have been a bloody and futile uprising.³²



From Our Own Times

"A conciliation commission worked for several years to forge a peace agreement between the Nicaraguan

Sandinista government and YATAMA, the armed opposition group representing the indigenous peoples of the eastern coastal area of Nicaragua. Some of the most memorable moments of the reconciliation process came around the meals that were shared by former enemies — fighters from the rebelling indigenous groups and Sandinista officials.

"On one occasion Commander Lumberto Campbell, a key leader in the Sandinista government, invited the entire YATAMA delegation to his home for a meal. He had a specially prepared meal of turtle, the most sought-after and cherished meat, particularly among the Miskitu. But turtle was scarce at that time and there was only enough for one plate. Lumberto shared that plate with Brooklyn Rivera, the head YATAMA leader. Under the large mango trees and in the stifling heat and humidity of the back patio, two native Costeños (coastal people), on opposite sides of a war, sat together and ate the dish of their ancestors."

- John Paul Lederach, *quoted in Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook, by Joetta Handrich Schlabach. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991, p. 210.* To order, call 1-800-245-7894 or go to www.heraldpress.com



Faith in Action Step

Is there a broken relationship in your life that could be healed by sharing food? With whom would you find it hard to eat? Respond to these questions in a journal; act on your insights.

Unit 5: Creating Community with Food

MORE FAITH IN ACTION STEPS

1. Do you have a standard “company meal” that can be served on short notice? Plan a menu that allows you to be spontaneous with your hospitality. Keep the necessary ingredients always in stock or prepare a quantity of a food that can be frozen.
2. If the season permits, host a picnic at a park instead of a meal at your home. This sidesteps the issue of cleaning the house and allows for a simple menu. It also provides after dinner entertainment: a hike, a volleyball game, a chance to catch fireflies.
3. Who prepares the food at your house? Is the workload shared in a way that seems fair to everybody? Discuss this question with your household and make adjustments that may enable you to offer hospitality more freely.
4. Find a way to interweave food preparation and prayer this week. Is there a poem or scripture passage you would like to memorize? Post it over your sink. Is there someone who needs your prayers? Hold this person in your heart as you prepare food each day this week.
5. Reshape a feast which no longer “fits.” Which traditions are so redolent with memories and fellowship that to change them would be a great loss? Which ones include excess that wouldn’t be missed? For example, suppose you are planning a wedding. It is one thing if you’ve always dreamed of a big, frothy wedding cake; quite another if you don’t even *like* wedding cakes. If the latter, consider a creative, healthy alternative. What about dishes that represent the two families involved and the way these traditions will mesh in your household?
6. How does your church or other group receive hospitality from others? Which of your ministries is most like the one described in Luke 10? Reflect and discuss.
7. Invite a minority group at your church to host a meal of foods native to their culture. What can you learn about each other by eating each other’s food?
8. Host a meal that highlights the hospitality you receive from the earth. Choose foods in season. If possible, pick them yourself.
9. In the Hebrew Bible, travelers who needed hospitality hung around the city gate and waited for someone to offer them bed and board. Is there a place in your church fellowship hall where people who might like to share a meal after worship can find each other? Designate a meeting corner or some other creative way to link up. Plant a few hosts at first to get the tradition going.
10. “You would never treat a guest the way you treat me!” spouses sometimes say to each other. This week, make a special effort to offer hospitality to your housemate, husband, wife, or other family member. Listen, learn, serve.
11. Give a gift of food as an act of forgiveness or encouragement: a loaf of bread, a jar of nuts, something special you made. For yourself, this could be a way of attending to a wound you couldn’t talk about or that the other person doesn’t even know he or she caused. For the receiver, your gift could communicate appreciation and respect, healing a simmering resentment you do not even know about.

(Continued on next page . . .)

MORE HEALTHY EATING TIPS

1. Most of us eat more when we have several choices. (Cake and ice cream? I'll have both.) Simplify your next dinner by serving fewer dishes. You can still eat a wide variety of foods without eating a wide variety at one sitting. On the other hand, if you want to eat more fruits and vegetables, serve multiple fruits and vegetables at meals.
2. Prepare for a feast by fasting. Look at your calendar this week and decide which meal is most likely to be a "feast." Prepare for this meal by eating lightly for a day beforehand. Reflect on how this affects your enjoyment of the meal.
3. Hosts are usually eager to please their guests. It may be possible to steer a host away from serving rich food you don't need. If you are honest about why and how you are changing your eating habits, they may be proud to support your efforts. Think of a situation where this might be the case and tell the truth about what you want and need. If you do this in settings where it would not offend, you can eat freely in the situations where it would be more Christ-like to "eat what is set before you."
4. "All we ever do together is eat." If this is true of a group in your life, maybe you need to work at creating community *without* food. Could your group meet around a quilt frame instead of a table? Stuff school kits for a relief effort instead of a turkey? Learn to cross country ski? Plan a food-free service project or other activity.
5. It is easier to begin new traditions than to alter old ones. This year, begin a new family tradition that involves healthy food. For example, pomegranates are available in many grocery stores during November and December. These unusual fruits with their juicy, jewel-like seeds are a festive and healthy holiday treat.
6. Walk a mile in someone else's diet. Interview a person in your congregation who is diabetic or requires a special diet for some reason. How does he or she cope with the way your congregation shares food? What would a feast that this person could eat look like? For one day, eat the food this person needs to eat in order to understand his or her challenges.