

“Sharing a Table Without Food Fights”

Proper 22C (October 6, 2019)

Scripture Readings: Lamentations 3:19-26; Luke 7:36; 11:37-44; 14:1; 17:5-6

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

In a *New York Times* article titled “God Is in the Salad Dressing,” Boris Fishman writes about sharing a meal with his friends in rural Virginia.¹ “I cherish [my friends],” he writes, “because we have [so] little in common” Fishman’s friends, Pete and Susan, are fundamentalist Christians; Fishman is Jewish. One visit to their house tested the friendship. “Entering the house one afternoon,” he writes, “I could tell something was wrong. Pete was cleaning in a way that didn’t seem to be about cleaning. Susan, who generally gets up at 5 a.m. and by late morning has done what most of us have done in a day, looked through me and said, ‘I need to sit down and watch a rerun of something.’ She did, eventually, explain that the night before, they’d received unwelcome news about one of their children. I waited for her to continue,” writes Fishman, “but that’s all she said. . . . [And] I said the only other thing I could think of, ‘Can I make lunch?’ Susan, who does all the family cooking, sighed. ‘I’ve been meaning to make a big salad for weeks,’ she said. [It was] settled, then. [I would make the salad]. Their youngest [child], who still lives at home, wanted nothing to do with a salad, so Susan said she would make her a grilled cheese. For the next 15 minutes, a house that is never at rest - four animals around us, 50 horses, sheep, goats, and ducks outside - fell silent. Pete, lost in thought, made snacks for his wife to eat later while she watched TV; Susan, lost in thought, made lunch for her daughter; and I, lost in my task, made salad for Susan The only sound was my peeling, chopping, and scraping, and a kitchen at work: the oven exhaling; a pan emerging to rest on the grills of the burners; the scrape of a spatula. The three of us entered the most beautiful silence - composed, rhythmic, and filled with a kind of grace Where just minutes before I’d felt only awkwardness, now I felt something approaching elation. If I were a believer,” writes Fishman, who is an atheist Jew, “I would have said God was there. When the salad was ready, Susan [hugged] me. . . . The power of food - of cooking, of cooking together -,” he writes, “is its ability to briefly blot out almost any pain. . . . [F]rom nothing you make something that will sustain you, and people you love, into tomorrow. It will last only till then, but tomorrow, you can do it again. . . . Food . . . is my faith,” he says. “The experience of making it, serving it, and eating it can be sacred. . . . And so,” he concludes, “I pray, in my secular way, that across a million kitchens where our [people, who are] divided [over religion and politics,] gather . . . , instead of saying what won’t help anyone by being said, someone in charge of a kitchen-sink salad asks someone from the other side to help her figure out the dressing. I used olive oil, honey-mustard dressing, lime juice, crushed red pepper flakes, and oregano”

Boris Fishman’s story stuck with me this week, as our country shreds itself over scandal and corruption, and an us vs. them political culture is pervasive, as we line up in tribes and wage war with ourselves - a war that reaches into our very families. I bet many of us here today have a crazy uncle or a wayward sibling or even a parent or child - someone who is biologically connected to us - but who speaks an entirely different political language, and who looks at the world through lenses that would never fit on us. Boris Fishman, an atheist

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/opinion/sunday/cooking-religion-faith.html>

Jew and a friend of fundamentalist Christians from rural Virginia, points to food and table as markers of grace - grace that just might change the equation, and make healing and hope possible.

In her book *Grace at Table*, Reverend Donna Shaper talks about the miraculous power of food. “Einstein argued there were two kinds of people,” she writes, “those who thought everything was a miracle and those who didn’t believe in miracles.” “All food is a miracle,” writes Shaper. “In a world where so many don’t eat, it is a miracle to eat.”² Shaper calls it “sacred chow.”³ Food is so basic, so necessary for all of us, that it naturally cracks open doors of conversation around other things we have in common, shoving our divisions to the periphery (at least until that crazy uncle makes a comment under his breath about impeachment as he passes the potatoes). Sharing a table, says Shaper, is a way to practice grace, to practice being gracious and forgiving and kind. Especially when preparing food goes terribly wrong. Shaper shares a story about a *faux pas* she committed when she served beets instead of plums for dessert at a meal she hosted. “I’ll never forget one summer serving a jar of my home canned beets instead of my home canned plums for dessert,” she writes. “I just confused the color in the jars - one was a deeper red than the other, but I couldn’t really tell. I had made quite the self-congratulatory prologue to this dessert,” she admits, “lauding the plums, talking about them way too long. As people dove into the beets, one by one, they said something to the effect that ‘these are the strangest plums I have ever eaten’.”⁴ Shaper doesn’t mention the moment she had to admit to her guests that the “plums” were actually “beets,” but she does talk a lot about grace in her book - about how sharing a table with someone who is different is a sacred act, an opportunity for God’s spirit to make the meal and the shared moment, holy and healing.

One theme in several of today’s readings from the New Testament is the theme of food, of sharing a table with someone who is different. It’s amazing to me how many times in Luke’s gospel Jesus shares a table with a Pharisee. It’s amazing, because Jesus generally didn’t say nice things about Pharisees in the gospels. In one of today’s readings, Jesus - who had received an invitation to dine with a Pharisee - starts a rhetorical food fight by calling the Pharisees “fools,” who, he says, are full of “greed and wickedness.” Jesus calls them hypocrites, who clean and tidy up the surface but who are filled with lies and deceit inside. Jesus does this, I should add, *while he’s sitting there* at the table of the host, who is a Pharisee. I imagine the other dinner guests slurping their soup, or rearranging food on their plates, in awkward silence as they pretended not to listen.

In the first of today’s readings from Luke, Jesus is dining with a Pharisee when a prostitute enters the room, bringing all conversation to a halt mid-chew. All she wants is to be treated as a human being instead of as an object of pleasure. She’s so desperate for this that she’s willing to risk being shamed for interrupting a dinner party. Jesus in the story doesn’t bat an eye, and shows her compassion and grace, while the Pharisee, who hosted the meal, crosses his arms and looks on in grumpy, judgy, teeth-clenching silence. In the final Pharisee food story in Luke’s gospel, Jesus is eating a Sabbath meal with several Pharisees. Once bitten, twice shy, the Pharisees, says Luke, “were watching [Jesus] closely,” waiting for him to start throwing rhetorical food. In that story, a man in need of healing enters the room, and Jesus

² Donna Shaper, *Grace at Table: Small Spiritual Solutions to Large Material Problems, Solving Everything* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 41.

³ Shaper, *Grace at Table*, 114.

⁴ Shaper, *Grace at Table*, 54.

does what Jesus does: he treats the person as a human being and a child of God, breaking rules around acceptable religious behavior in order to show compassion. Jesus healed that man during the Sabbath meal. And the judgy Pharisees looked on in disgust. But Jesus didn't care. Compassion was his religion.

Yes, given this fraught history of rhetorical food-fighting, it's amazing that Jesus kept eating with Pharisees. Scholars have puzzled over this for the past 200 years. Some have even suggested that Jesus himself *was* a Pharisee - why else was he always on the "invite" list for Pharisee dinner parties? We'll never know for sure, but we do know that Pharisees in first century Judaism were shadowy figures. Their history is murky. Much of what we *think* we know about Pharisees comes from two ancient sources: the New Testament, where they tend to get a bad rap and are presented as a bunch of self-righteous bad guys; and the first century Jewish historian Josephus, who claims to have been a Pharisee, but who also makes several historical mistakes in his writings. Josephus is not always the most reliable ancient source. As one of my professors at Harvard eloquently put it: "I wouldn't buy a used chariot from Josephus." So, historically speaking, we don't know much about Pharisees. But we *do* know that they locked horns with Jesus many times. They argued with him and with his disciples about all sorts of religious practices. Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy for forgiving sins. They accused him of breaking with religious custom when he healed on the Sabbath. And they were hawks when it came to protecting religious traditions around food. They had strict rules about food preparation, and about ritual hand-washing before eating food, and about who you could eat with. They were the religious conservatives, who saw in progressive Jesus and his rule-bending ways, a threat to established norms.

Which is why it's so amazing to me that Jesus sat down and shared "sacred chow" with Pharisees as often as he did. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has argued that Jesus was especially known for his table practices. *Not* so much for his rhetorical food-fights with hosts, but for his willingness to eat with *anyone*: tax collectors, prostitutes, you name it - he made space at the table for people in need of care, and for disciples who he knew would abandon and betray him the night before his death. Still he ate with all of them, as our communion liturgy declares. He ate with the betrayers and the doubters, the deserters and the judgy-types, the hate-filled and the hopeful, the sinners and those with terrible manners. Jesus lived the grace of God - a grace that says no one is excluded; all are lavishly loved; all deserve to be treated as human beings instead of as objects - *all*, even that crazy uncle, who mutters about God knows what as he passes the potatoes.

To share a table is to make a theological statement as people of faith. "Share a table" is a metaphor for a certain posture we have. A posture of hope. Today's Old Testament reading is a theological poem about hope in the most dire of circumstances. The poet composes the poem after Jerusalem has been sacked by a foreign army, the people have been enslaved, the sacred temple destroyed. From the very depths of anguish, the poet musters courage - courage like that of Aragorn in Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, who, when facing impossible odds said, "there is always hope." The poet who penned Lamentations 3 sings of hope. Commenting on this text, Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, "in a remarkable reversal, the poet [in Lamentations 3] asserts: '... I have hope ...'." ⁵ It is astonishing," writes Brueggemann, given what the poet has been through, "that the poem

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 221.

moves so quickly from hopelessness ... to hope ...” As people of faith we can’t help but hope. It’s in our spiritual DNA. We share our table in hope, looking into the eyes of someone who is so different, believing that the mere act of eating together - eating like Jesus did with Pharisees - can move the needle toward grace, and kindness, and understanding, and perhaps even a miraculous spark of God’s spirit that can turn even the stoniest of judgy hearts toward compassion.

...Let me close today with a story told by Reverend Lillian Daniel in her book *When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough*.⁶ It’s a story about tables and food. “Have you ever noticed,” she writes, “that the restaurant where you least want to eat, the restaurant that looks the most unappealing and certainly the least elegant, is always the restaurant that has the sign NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO SERVICE? And I find myself wondering, Has this been a problem for them in the past? Do people walk into these places and realize, ‘Oh no, I forgot my shirt. And my shoes too. But at least I’ve got my pants on?’ Is it a community-wide issue? Or is there one particular customer who keeps forgetting, and the sign is just for him? In that case, it should say, ‘Jared, no shirt, no shoes, no service,’ ... I suppose what they are trying to say with that sign is that although this is a casual place, there are limits. We don’t just serve anybody. You have to have clothing on. Or at least ... specific items of clothing. Well, at least they put it out there. Most of society is not that honest. Groups of people have those signs in their heads, but outsiders never see them. ... [P]icture this moment,” writes Daniel, talking about her own experience as a teenager who switched high schools several times, “You enter the school cafeteria and freeze. You clutch your lunch and wonder. Where do I sit? Will I be welcomed? Will I be ignored? This is the worst moment ... [But] you will get through it because you have been the new kid before. Every couple of years, in fact, you have gone to a new school and faced this hideous moment. But the noise from the lunch room hits you like a bomb. It is so loud and so full, but for you it is so empty. All that chattering, shrieking, and laughing does not include you, and it never has. You are the outsider. You have nowhere to sit. You could turn around and spend the lunch hour in the bathroom, but then tomorrow you will have to deal with this again. ... ‘Is someone sitting here?’ you ask at a table with an empty seat or two. A shrug. ‘Go ahead.’ You remember your last school where, when you asked, ‘Is someone sitting here?’ they said, ‘Sorry, it’s taken.’ So you sat somewhere else and then spent the lunch hour looking at that still-empty seat, and the girls around it whispering to one another, saying, ‘That was mean,’ when their laughter indicated what it really was, to them: funny. After that, you wondered if you would always eat alone at this school. And now, sitting here, living this moment one more time, you sit down, and wonder: Will they talk to me? Will I ever eat with these people again? ‘What’s your name?’ the girl I have joined at the table asks me. Another says, ‘Where did you move from?’ And at her question, my heart,” says Daniel, “fills with such gratitude that I fight to keep back the tears. They have welcomed me. I have a place to sit. I will not have to eat alone in the middle of a crowded room. ... There may be assigned seating [in much of the world, she concludes,] but in the kingdom of heaven there is not. And so if we believe in that heavenly banquet, we ought to act like it, and live it out here. For Jesus ... , there were no assigned seats at his table. All were welcome, particularly in their brokenness, for the church was born on the damaged consciences and rotten reputations of tax collectors, sinners, and people in need.” I only add this: we say every Sunday, “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” This statement includes our table. Amen.

⁶ Lillian Daniel, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), .