

Food for the People of God
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Date: October 7, 2012

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In the United Church of Christ we have two sacraments, Baptism and Communion. This will be on the quiz later. This morning's scripture passage from 1 Corinthians deals with Communion, giving us an example of what not to do. But before I go there, today also marks the start of my sermon series on the Seven Deadly Sins. And the first sin up is gluttony. It's one of the sins that doesn't seem all that bad. After all, who doesn't on occasion eat a bit too much and feel a little gluttonous? We may not label it that way, but speak to most Americans after Thanksgiving dinner, and the majority of us may leave the table very full, maybe even uncomfortably full. This may happen on more days than Thanksgiving too if we're honest with ourselves.

Gluttony can strike us as silly or sad, but in a culture where the drive-through has become standard and many of us struggle with weight or making good food choices when confronted with so many delicious temptations, it's actually a more serious problem than we'd like to admit.[1]

Gluttony is also a tricky subject in Christianity since a great deal of what we do in churches revolves around food. One of the big metaphors for the Kingdom of God is a banquet. In the Gospel of Luke alone, nineteen meals are mentioned. Jesus talks about food all the time, and he gets criticized for eating with the wrong people, like prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. Food is used as a metaphor for life in the Bible, and sharing food with one another means that we are sharing our lives.[2]

Ironically enough, a study came out last year that linked being religious to being overweight. The article I found from CNN related, "Religious involvement is linked to many positive health outcomes, such as happiness, lower rates of smoking and alcohol use, and even a longer life. But research has also suggested that middle-aged adults who are more religious are more likely to be obese." [3] I can totally believe this. At my home church when I was in youth group, one of the moms was famous for her chocolate chip cookies. She sent us a large tin full of them whenever we had an event. And we never had any leftovers to send home with her daughters. Please.

We have our own unique food cultures at churches. Here at Pilgrim Church, some of you are known for being good cooks; you're famous for your own distinctive dishes that you share. And I am not naming names or your famous dishes because I'll get in trouble if I leave anyone out. You know who you are.

Actually, the second interview I had with the Search Committee here at Pilgrim was over dinner. After my neutral pulpit, the Search Committee took me out to lunch. Before I met the entire congregation, we had a dinner for the Search Committee and Church Council. And my parents and I were introduced to you at a church-wide breakfast. Are we sensing a pattern here? We covered all our meals together—breakfast, lunch, and dinner before I even became your pastor!

So why did you wine and dine me before you even really knew me? I have a theory—there's something very humanizing about eating with one another, about this form of hospitality, especially if you're just getting to know someone and your goal is to make them feel like a part of your community. This is just what we do when we church folk get together—we bond over food, we make meals when members of our community become ill or for the family of someone who's just passed away, we have coffee hour after every church service. These are good

practices of hospitality! I don't think that we should judge ourselves for them, but it's also no wonder that we've had to or should deal with gluttony in the Christian Church. We can acknowledge just how much our community life revolves around food and this practice could lend itself to overindulgence.

This becomes apparent when we consider that the sacrament of Communion itself is a meal and symbolizes a meal. Our contention in the UCC is that all are welcome at Christ's table, this is a major theological statement some of us may take for granted. But our open table in the UCC becomes even more important when we consider what was happening in the church in Corinth.

In the early Church in general, Communion wasn't always just the bread and wine and an ordained person presiding over the sacrament. It was often called the Love Feast. In contrast to the Roman idea of love feasts that involved sumptuous foods and sometimes orgies and other questionable behaviors (we'll get to the deadly sin of lust in November, I'm blushing already)... but the Christian Love Feast was simply a chance to be together and share a meal.

But what Paul discovered was happening in the Corinthian Church was that the rich in the community would arrive first, they'd eat their own food and get drunk before other people could even come to the table. Some celebration of the Lord's Supper! You don't wait for everyone to arrive before you eat, you bring your own food that you don't share, and you get drunk before your fellow Christians arrive. Paul gets mad, saying, "Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing." [4] What they were doing was carrying over the Roman practice of feasting, where the rich and powerful would receive the best seats at banquets and would have the best foods and drinks near them, while the poorest and least influential had to sit in courtyards off the main banquet room and consume less quality meals. [5]

In some ways, what these early Christians were doing was even worse than Roman practices because they were apparently eating and drinking everything before others could come. And the others had nothing to eat and were humiliated. Talk about the Deadly Sin of gluttony! This was happening when the community was supposed to be united in the Lord's Supper. It was a terrible moment in the Church, that's why Paul gets so feisty.

In the end, the virtue that can come out of the Deadly Sin of gluttony is Communion. Holy Communion is the most sacramental form of eating in the Christian Church, and as we've covered, we have a lot of forms of eating! Our simple meal of bread and juice sends the message that less is more in a culture where we're told that we should "go big or go home," and have more and more of everything. We rejoice in the simplicity and splendor of this holy meal we eat and drink together. [6]

This reminds me of the ending of the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. In the movie, Indy is trying to find the Holy Grail, the cup that Christ used for the Last Supper that will supposedly grant immortality. The movie has plot twists and turns, and finally Indy finds the cave where the Holy Grail is housed. There must be a hundred cups that he has to choose from; knowing that drinking from the wrong cup will kill him.

The Nazi's historian who's also racing to find the Holy Grail chooses a cup he deems to be fit for a king—it's golden and ornate. He drinks from the cup and dies right before their eyes. This scene was probably scary when the movie came out in 1989, but now it's hilarious. But anyway, Indy looks around the room again and he tries to identify the real cup of Jesus Christ. He muses that Jesus was a simple carpenter, and so he chooses an unassuming cup with no ornamentation that looks a little beat up and worn. And he chooses wisely, he picks the right cup.

This is clearly Hollywood trying to deal with some theological issues and myths regarding the Last Supper. But what I like about this portrayal is that the cup of Christ is shown to be ordinary, not jeweled and made of pure gold. This is what I think we get at when we celebrate the sacrament of Communion. It's what Paul was trying to tell the church in Corinth when he criticized them for not being respectful toward one another especially during Communion.

Because Communion, as much as it's about table fellowship and food, is not about gluttony and overindulgence and having more and more stuff. Holy Communion is about fellowship and hospitality. Communion is about sharing and simplicity. Communion is about the love we show to one another when we welcome and invite every single person to Christ's table to participate. Communion is a gift of God for the people of God. And on this World Communion Sunday, let's recognize that Communion is a gift to the entire Church. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*.

[2] Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 92.

[3] Alice Park, "Why Going to Church Can Make You Fat," March 24, 2011, <http://healthland.time.com/2011/03/24/why-going-to-church-can-make-you-fat/#ixzz28FcBFLwy>

[4] 1 Corinthians 11:22

[5] Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, Ed., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 305.

[6] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*, 126.