Sunday, October 3, 1993
THEY ATE TOGETHER
Acts 2:42-47

What were some of the characteristics of the early New Testament church that set it apart from the rest of society? What can we learn from them?

According to Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts in the New Testament, the members of the early New Testament church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." He further adds that "many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."

In addition, Luke says that the members of the early church had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Then Luke mentions another striking characteristic of the early church that, more than anything else, demonstrated how this new movement was turning the world upside down and shaking everything loose.

What was this activity that was so extraordinary and in such contrast to the society in which the church existed? They ate together. Luke says that "day by day... they broke bread in their homes and partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God." Although these meals may have incorporated some of what we have come to associate with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, they were also common meals. What we have here is the record of the first church potluck dinners. You bring a salad, you bring a casserole, and someone else will bring dessert.

They ate together. It sounds so simple and common that we pass over the phrase and miss its startling implications. Why was eating together so revolutionary?

It was an amazing activity because, in those days, among those people, it was unheard of. Those early New Testament congregations had in them all kinds of people. There were Jews and Gentiles, women and men, slaves and free. What they had in common was that they were "followers of the way" of Jesus. They knew they were sisters and brothers with God as their Creator. They were members of one family. They ate together. It was a counter-cultural thing to do because first-century Jews and Gentiles were sworn enemies. They would have nothing to do with each other. Not only did they live in separate neighborhoods (it's all right to love your neighbors if you choose your neighbors carefully), they wouldn't walk on the same side of the street.

The division between Jews and Gentiles in those days was so severe that if a Gentile happened to wander into a Jewish household while a meal was being served, all the food would have to be thrown out because it was then considered unclean. Jews considered it a crime to aid a Gentile woman in childbirth because to do so was to help bring another Gentile into the world. The division between Jews and Gentiles of that day was even more severe than that between Jews and Palestinians in our time or between Blacks and Whites in our own country when segregation was the rule of the day.

So when Luke says that the members of the early church ate together, it was not just a casual action. It was a sign and wonder. They actually sat down and ate together. Even today, eating

together almost more than anything else symbolizes that we are all members of one human family.

It was no accident that during the civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, lunch counters and restaurants that said Blacks and Whites could not eat at the same counters or tables were some of the first targets for sit-ins.

In the early church, what would it take for such sworn, bitter enemies to put aside age-old animosities and traditions to come together in that way? Something must have happened because, heretofore, they would never have sat down at a table together. Now they were passing a loaf of bread with glad and generous hearts. What happened?

In short, Jesus happened. In the first letter of John in the New Testament, the writer reports how Jesus can change our way of looking at the world. He writes, “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another.”

A minister friend of mine once told me about a terrible fight that took place in the congregation he was serving. Two factions were at each other’s throats. Finally, someone stood up in the congregational meeting, looked at both parties in the dispute, and said, “If we can stand both of you, we think you should be able to stand each other.”

Isn’t that what Jesus asks us to do if we claim to be followers of his way? He says to each one of us, “If I, who know more flaws in you, all of you, than you can possibly imagine, can love you, then shouldn’t you be able to accept one another?”

You see, from our point of view, there are friends and enemies, people on the inside and the outside, people who are like us and those that are completely different from us, those we seek out and those we want to have nothing to do with. But as Paul said to the quarreling Corinthians, “from now on we regard no one from a human point of view.”

As Christians, we now take our cue not from our own thoughts, feelings, and judgments, for now we see that our own responses are imperfect and misleading and ultimately don’t matter. Rather, what matters for a Christian is to see others as Jesus does, the same Jesus who invited him at the table, the same Jesus who included Judas at his last supper.

Someone once put it this way: “The Kingdom of God is simply seeing things from Jesus’ point of view.” So, for the members of the early church to sit down and eat together means nothing less than that they had learned to trust Jesus’ point of view more than their own. What a sign and wonder that is.

We need more signs and wonders like that in our time, not only in the church but in society at large. We still separate people in so many ways. We set up so many artificial barriers. He’s Black. She’s White. He’s tall. She’s short. I’m a German-American. She’s an African-American. He’s a Chinese-American. I’m a Christian. She’s a Jew, and he’s a Muslim.

Jesus was aware of our differences and unique identities, but he also knew that we can go too far in making those the most important things about us, or the only things about us.

The newspaper columnist Russell Baker illustrated how easily we can carry our labels to the extreme.

He wrote: “I am a European-American. I am a male European-American. I am a Depression-generation male European-American. I am a hearing-impaired, Depression-generation male European-American.”

“I am a college-educated, hearing-impaired, Depression-generation male European-American. Because I have not lost my mind yet, I am a college-educated, hearing-impaired, Depression-generation male European-American.” Russell Baker went on for a whole long column in this vein to point out how silly we can become with our labels.

Furthermore, labels can and often are used to manipulate and put people down. By simply invoking a label, we can create a hierarchy of power: White over Black, rich over poor, men over women, educated over illiterate. Or we say, “He’s a conservative,” or “She’s a liberal.” We like to sharply categorize people.

I believe that through Jesus, God calls us to honor and celebrate our uniqueness and diversity, and at the same time to move beyond it to a higher unity. In another context, that’s what the Apostle Paul was talking about in his letter to the church in Corinth when he used the metaphor of the human body and its many parts. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

Then Paul went on to say, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you,’ and the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.'” All parts of the body are necessary, even though different. Each part needs the other parts, and one cannot say that it is more important than the others.

Thus the emphasis on “multiculturalism” today in many places in our country is positive in that it reminds us of the contributions that many different cultures and races have made to our overall society. But it can become detrimental if I come to believe that the most important thing about me is that I am a German-American or an Irish-American.

It finally comes down to this — what is the most important thing about you? Jesus said that the most important thing about each one of us is that we are each a child of God, and therefore we are all members of one human family. We belong to the family of God.

Thornton Wilder understood this and what it means when he gave the following as the address of one of his characters in the play Our Town:

“Jane Crofut; Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; The Earth; The Solar System; The Universe; The Mind of God.” You come from the Mind of God. I come from the Mind of God. Every human being comes from the Mind of God. Your life is completely surrounded by God. Always you are held in God’s infinite love and care. And when you die, all the labels you had attached to you in this life are meaningless. They are all removed. When you are invited to God’s banquet, to sit at God’s table, there will be all kinds of people there, people you had never imagined that you would ever eat with; people who in this life, you didn’t want to eat with; people that you would never have invited to sit at your table in your home.

But why do we need to wait for death to unite us? Why can’t we eat together at the same table now?

I believe it's one of the scandals of the church that there are Christians who still want to fence off the table of Christ. They keep people they believe are different from them from eating with them at Christ's table. Today and every day, I invite you to see all people from the point of view of Jesus, the same Jesus who invited Samaritans, tax collectors, and prostitutes to eat with him, rather than through your own emotions and feelings.

The good news is that God invites all of us to eat together at God's table. I hope you will accept God's invitation, and that you will extend that invitation so that any of God's children are also welcome at your table. Amen.