Sunday, October 6, 2002
EATING TOGETHER
Acts 2:42-47

There are times when, in reading the Bible, some of the most revolutionary statements are hardly noticed because to us they seem so ordinary. Listen again to the first verse of the scripture reading for today and see if you can pick out the most startling phrase. In this text, Luke, who wrote the book of Acts and also the gospel of Luke, is describing the activity of the early church: “They (that is the members of the early church, following the death and resurrection of Jesus) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

The key revolutionary phrase here is “the breaking of bread,” in other words, eating together. Luke tells us: “Day by day… they broke bread in their homes and partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.” Why was this practice so radical? The answer to that question begins with the public ministry of Jesus.

In a book on the historical Jesus, Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography, author Bruce Chilton, a renowned biblical scholar, argues that Jesus was an early follower of John the Baptist; however, he went his own way and developed his own followers. A major difference between Jesus and John had developed. The difference was that John the Baptist emphasized that being baptized brought unique access to God’s Holy Spirit. Jesus believed and taught that God’s Spirit, with all of its energizing love and power, could be even more experienced and known in eating together. Whereas baptism was a one-time event, eating together took place regularly.

As a result, Chilton maintains that Jesus became widely known for his fellowship meals. He ate and drank his way through Galilee. That’s why, in many of his teachings, he describes the kingdom of God as being like a huge banquet, a big party, with people of all sorts eating together in joyful celebration.

The most shocking part of his eating and drinking in his public ministry was that he did so with all kinds of people: sinners, Samaritans, and others considered unclean. All this eating and drinking culminated in his final Last Supper with his closest followers. Jesus designated the wine he poured out and of which they all drank as the blood of sacrifice, and the bread as his flesh, which God preferred over what was offered in the corrupt Temple of his day. He instructed his followers to continue this practice.

So, it is not surprising that after his death and resurrection, his disciples, now called “followers of the way,” continued eating together, and in so doing remembered him and experienced the comforting presence of God.

Although these meals may have incorporated some of what we now associate with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper or what we call “Holy Communion,” they were also common meals. What we have here in the book of Acts is the record of the first church potluck dinners. You bring a salad. I’ll bring a casserole. And someone else brings dessert.

They ate together. It sounds so simple and common that we pass over the phrase and miss its shocking implications. It was revolutionary because, in those days, among people who were not followers of the way, it was unheard of. Those early congregations had all kinds of people

in them. 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 and that they were all created in God's image, and they demonstrated this by eating together.

This practice was radical both religiously and culturally because first-century Jews and Gentiles were enemies. They would have nothing to do with each other. Not only did they live in separate neighborhoods (it's all right and easy to love your neighbors if you choose them carefully), but they also wouldn't walk on the same side of the street. The division between Jews and Gentiles 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 would be considered unclean. Jews even considered it a crime to aid a Gentile woman in childbirth because to do so was to help bring another Gentile into the world.

This divide 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, he is reporting a radical action. It is a sign and wonder. Even today, eating together, more than anything else we do, symbolizes that we are all members of one human family.

It is no accident that during the civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, lunch counters — where people could not eat at the same counters or tables — were the first targets for sit-ins. Remember the old movie Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? It was about people of different races eating together.

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 before this, they would never have sat down at the same table together. Now, they were eating at the same table with glad and generous hearts. What happened? The answer is, Jesus happened. In the first letter of John in the New Testament, the writer reports how Jesus can change your way of living in the world. He writes, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another."

A minister friend of mine 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 one another."

That's what followers of the way are asked to do. Through Jesus, God is saying to you and me, "If I can stand all of you, love you more than you can possibly imagine, then shouldn't you be able to accept one another?"

From our human point of view, we tend to put people into categories. There are friends and enemies, people on the inside and the outside, people you consider to be similar to you and others who seem too different from you, and you want to have as little to do with them as possible. So it was that the Apostle Paul said to the quarreling Corinthians in order to solve this problem, "From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view."

Paul was saying that as followers of the way, you take your cue, not from your own thoughts, feelings, and judgments, because they are frequently imperfect, misleading, and ultimately

don’t matter. What matters for a follower of the way is to see others as Jesus did, the same Jesus who invited Samaritans, tax collectors, and all other sinners to join him at the table.

An ancient Christian teacher defined the kingdom of God in 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 meant nothing less than they had learned to trust Jesus’ point of view more than their own.

We need more signs and wonders like that in our time, not only in the church but in society at large. We still try to 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 African-American. He’s Chinese-American. She’s a Jew. He’s a Muslim.

Jesus never suggested that we deny our ancestry, our ethnic background, or our religious heritage, but he knew that we can go too far in that direction and make it the most important thing about us — or the only thing 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,” and he went on and on in the column with more adjectives to define who he was, so by the time you reached the end of the column, you realized how silly it all is, and you want to say, “So what?”

The problem is that labels can and often are used to manipulate and put people down. By using a label, you can create a hierarchy of power: white over black, rich over poor, men over women. She’s a liberal. He’s a conservative. 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, 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 at 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 were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

Then he 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 important, though different.

It finally comes down to this — what is the most important thing about you? Jesus said that the most important thing about you is that you are a child of God, created in God’s image, and you are all members of one family of God.

To put it another way, you come from the love of God. Your life is completely surrounded by God. And when you die, all the labels attached to you and that you applied to others in this life are meaningless. They are all removed. You will find in the life after this life that when you are invited to sit at God’s table, there will be all kinds of people there — people you had never imagined you would ever eat with, maybe even people you would never have thought of inviting to sit at your table at home.

We don’t need to wait for death to eat together. Today, in this World Wide Communion celebration, we symbolically are eating together at God’s table with all sorts of people.

I know that there are those who still want to fence off the table of God. They want to keep people they believe are different from them from eating at the table of Christ.

Today and every day, I invite you to see all people from the point of view that Jesus held — the same one who invited Samaritans, tax collectors, and all sinners to eat with him. God also invites you to eat at this table, today and always. Amen.