Book 44

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 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 new book on the historical Jesus, "RABBI JESUS, An Intimate Biography," the author, Bruce Chilton, a renowned biblical scholar, argues that Jesus was an early follower of John the Baptist and

was tremendously influenced by him. After a time, 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 described the Kingdom of God as being like a huge banquet, a big party, with people of all sorts eating together in a 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 other people considered to be 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 his bread the flesh which God preferred to what was offered in the corrupt Temple of his day. He instructed his followers to continue

to eat together in memory of him.

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 have come to 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 pot-luck dinners. You bring a salad. I'll bring a casserole. And someone

else will bring the 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 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 that 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.

They ate together. It was subversive and counter-cultural 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), they 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 then have been considered unclean. Jews considered it a crime to aid a Gentile woman in childbirth because to do so was to help bring another Gentile nto 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, 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 1960's, lunch counters and

restaurants which said that black people and white people could not eat at the same counters or tables were the first targets for "sit-ins." Remember that 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've happened because heretofore they would never have sat down at 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 accept you, seeing as I do, more flaws in you, all of you, than you can possibly imagine, then shouldn't you be able to accept one another?"

From our human point of view, we always 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 that you think are too much different from you and therefore 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 is reminding you 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 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 means nothing less than 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 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 that 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 realize 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 the use of a label, you can create a hierarchy of power; white over black, rich over poor, men over women,

educated over not educated. He's a conservative. 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, 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 are all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free–and we

are 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.

Always you are held in God's infinite love and care. And when you die, all the labels you had attached to you and which 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 that 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.

Unfortunately, it's one of the scandals of the church 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.