



“Dinner and Denial”
April 2, 2023 | Palm Sunday
Charlie Berthoud | Matthew 21:1-11, 26:17-35

There are many reasons to like Jesus.

- He was smart and asked good questions, like “which one of these acted like a neighbor?”
- He was a good listener, and he cared for people, especially the lost, the least, and the last.
- He urged people to discover a more meaningful life, calling them to change their minds, change their directions and focused on the Kingdom of God.
- He turned water into wine...!
- And he loved to eat.

As Julia Child said, “People who love to eat are the best people.”

In the gospels, Jesus and food appear regularly, especially in Luke.

Jesus provides food for thousands of people by miraculously multiplying bread and fish. He teaches his followers to feed hungry people. And he shares meals with Pharisees, with disciples, as well as with the so-called “sinners.”

The political and religious leaders of the day were not happy with Jesus sharing meals with supposedly “inappropriate” people. Sharing a meal is a sign of mutual acceptance and even intimacy. He violated religious and political norms by breaking bread with poor people and sick people and foreign people.

I’ve read some biblical scholars who say with just a little irony that Jesus was arrested and killed for bad table manners.

Thinking about all of those meals Jesus had, especially the ones where he ate with these so-called sinners, I find myself wondering what was said around the table as they

ate together. What did they talk about? In most gospel accounts we don't know what was said, but in today's gospel reading we do.

Jesus and the disciples share an intimate meal together, and we learn about some of their conversation. But the focus of the story is what happens after the meal.

Listen for God's word:

¹⁷ On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" ¹⁸ He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" ¹⁹ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

²⁰ When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve disciples, ²¹ and while they were eating he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²² And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" ²³ He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." ²⁵ Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night, for it is written,

'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

³² "But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." ³³ Peter said to him, "Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to

him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”³⁵ Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

Jesus shares this holy meal with the disciples, and then the talk turns to betrayal and denial. Not exactly a happy meal.

And yet our liturgy and our tradition describe communion as the joyful feast of the people of God.

A big part of that is because scripture uses meals as imagery for the promise of heaven, a reason to be hopeful, especially since the meals are big and it seems like everyone is invited.

In Isaiah 25 we read:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
 a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
 of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
 the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
 the covering that is spread over all nations;
 he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces...

In Luke’s gospel we read in chapter 13

“Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and take their places at **the banquet in the kingdom of God**. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

In Revelation we get a glimpse of God’s future with:

“A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne... They will **hunger no more** and thirst no more.”

A few chapters later in Revelation we read about a heavenly meal:

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the **marriage supper** of the Lamb.”

If heaven or the afterlife is about a big meal, that sounds pretty good to me.

The hope with communion here on earth, is that the meal would nourish us in God’s mercy and love, giving us strength for faithful living, while reminding us of that God is forgiving and that we are together part of the body of Christ, the church.

In other words, communion reminds us of God’s love and seeks to give us strength to share that love.

So what happens after we share communion?

In the scripture reading today, as Jesus predicted, Judas betrays Jesus, and Peter denies Jesus. So maybe we should think for a bit about betrayal and denial.

Some of us have been part of churches where betraying and denying Jesus was about being afraid to tell someone that you’re a Christian or about not talking about church or the Bible or God.

While those issues are important, I think our betrayal and denial is more about the things we do and the way we live our lives, rather than just what we say or don’t say.

We have the meal here, but does it change how we live out there?

After we have communion, do we deny and betray Jesus?

The answer is yes, in a variety of ways.

I think we betray and deny Jesus when we take our loved ones for granted.

Years ago, I got locked out of our family home in Connecticut, so I knocked on the door of our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Frank, wonderful people who were probably in their 70s at that time. They had no idea I was coming, and after they answered the door and invited me in, I was in awe.

There they were sitting together at their kitchen table, having just finished dinner and just starting a game of cards together. After hugs and warm greetings, they offered me food and got me a spare key.

I've remembered that encounter all these years later, how wonderful to see a long-married couple eating together at their cozy kitchen table, and genuinely enjoying each other's company.

The affection and kindness they showed in public was sincere and they lived it together.

May God help us to not take our loved ones for granted.

I think we betray and deny Jesus when we fail to heed the call to be kind and generous.

Over the years, I've heard too many anecdotes from restaurant workers who speak dismissively about "the Sunday church crowd." It seems that there are many well-dressed people who apparently have gone from Sunday services to their favorite restaurants, where they proceed to be rude and leave small tips.

May God help us to be kind and generous and patient in church and especially beyond church.

I think we betray and deny Jesus when we forget that hunger is still a problem for too many people, including some of our immediate neighbors.

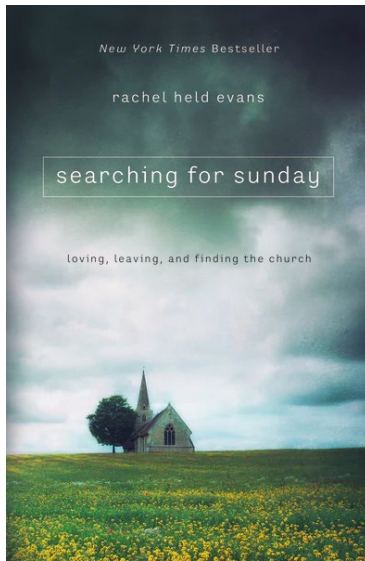
I remember when we were considering putting up the Little Free Pantry out front. I and others wondered if it was needed in our neighborhood. Well it is needed. People stop by all the time. And in the past year, I've learned that The River Food Pantry does deliveries to many homes within walking distance of our church.

May God help us to find ways to share our bread with hungry neighbors, near and far.

Coming to church for communion is great, but we need to carry the spirit of communion into the world, so we don't deny our calling to follow Jesus and love our neighbors.

God feeds us with bread and juice, God feeds us with forgiveness and love. Once we are fed, we go to feed a world that is hungry in body and hungry in spirit.

In her wonderful memoir called *Searching for Sundays: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, Rachel Held Evans tells about the time when her beloved aunt died unexpectedly. The family gathered together in Iowa to comfort each other. (pp. 132-133)



As they gathered at her aunt and uncle’s home, the doorbell rang every regularly as members of First Baptist Church showed up with casseroles of cold cuts, fresh fruit and bread, homemade ice cream and pieces of pie of every variety. She adds: “In Iowa, by the way, Jello is considered a salad.”

She is sitting with her dad in the house, grateful that her uncle is being cared for by the community. One more person arrives, holding a bunch of food in Tupperware with one arm, while hugging Evans’ grieving uncle with the other arm.

Her dad says: “That’s the lady who served us communion at church this morning.”

Evans replied: “And here she is, serving it again.”

Let us pray....

Loving God, thank you for offering us the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Nourish our deepest hungers, so we can feed a world that is hungry for bread, for meaning, and for love. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.

Scripture after communion, from Matthew 25:

Jesus said, ‘I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’