

## **DINNER WITH JESUS**

- St Andrew's UC, Sudbury; October 4, 2009 (WW Communion) –  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

*Religion* has become almost a dirty word these days.  
As though religion is synonymous with fanaticism and fundamentalism.  
As though a religious person is predisposed to  
narrow mindedness and acts of extremism.

Personally, I'd like to reclaim a broader definition of religion.  
Maybe something like this:

*Religion is a system of human thought  
which usually includes a set of narratives, symbols, beliefs, and practices  
that give meaning to a person's experience of life  
through reference to a higher power or ultimate truth.*

How do you like *that* for the-meaning-of-religion-in-a-nutshell?!  
I have to be honest: I didn't come up with that definition on my own.  
But I do believe that religion provides us  
with the stories and rituals and ways of being and doing  
that help us to frame and express our experience of the holy.

Life is a journey—  
for most of us,  
a journey of seeking and trying to make sense of life—  
and on this journey we need “containers”  
to hold and carry the meaning we discover.

Religion, in its many and varied guises, offers us some of those containers.

This morning—today being Worldwide Communion Sunday—  
I invite you to focus  
on one of the rituals of our Christian faith tradition:  
the sacrament of communion.

Identifying communion as a sacrament  
refers to the fact that somehow this ritual of gathering  
around the communion table  
makes opportunity for the Holy to be present and active.

It's also an acknowledgment  
that we can't quite find language to say what it's really about.

That's the thing about myth and ritual—  
we're using metaphor to express something  
that we actually can't put into words.

The communion table is empty this morning.  
Usually the Worship & Music Committee has the table prepared  
for the celebration of communion.  
And usually, even on Sundays when we are not celebrating communion,  
there are items on this table—  
candles, a Bible, a cross—  
symbols that speak to us of the stories of our faith.

But not this morning.  
This morning we are encouraged to approach the table  
with fresh eyes,  
to consider again the significance of what we do around this table  
without slipping into the ease of what is familiar.....

Our communion liturgy always begins with thanksgiving.  
We come to the Table with gratitude.  
Gratitude for creation.  
Gratitude for the ways in which we encounter God on the journey.  
Gratitude for Jesus  
who in some inexpressible way acts as a “container”  
for holy Presence.  
Gratitude for the hope we hold onto together—  
that the Giver of Life is with us in life, in death, in life beyond death.  
Gratitude for the provision that is made for us at this Table.

The table was never intended to be empty, of course.  
(And it won't stay empty this morning, I assure you!)  
Jesus proclaimed a theology of plenty and provision and hospitality.  
A theology of a full table, groaning under the weight of enough-for-all.

A table groaning under the weight of Jesus.  
Because Jesus didn't just talk about God's provision  
to people starving for bread for the belly and bread for the soul.  
He *embodied* that provision.  
He gave himself totally, body and soul, flesh and blood,  
so that we might never be hungry again.

We are not always so comfortable with that earthiness,  
that connection of flesh-and-blood to the holiness of sacrament.

And yet, that symbolism is a fundamental expression  
of Jesus' act of self-giving—  
his willingness to go to the ends of the earth for us,  
to seek justice and resist evil  
even when that demanded of him the ultimate price: his flesh and blood.

He asked us to remember him.  
To remember, as we eat and drink again around this Table,  
that Jesus comes to the table as one who serves.  
That he gives himself utterly.  
For love.

But we do not come to this Table only to say grace and then to eat.  
There is a way to come to the Table.

An etiquette to be observed.  
Had we read further in the Corinthians passage,  
we would have come to a verse that reads as follows:  
*So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat,  
wait for one another.*

It is asked of us that we discern the body as we share at table together.  
We give thanks for the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.  
And we also discern that we are the Body of Christ,  
the beloved community.

We discern that this Table is set for all of God's children.  
This banquet is for anyone who wants to attend.  
There is no exclusion here, no head table, no dress code.

As Chuck Campbell points out in his book "The Word Before the Powers,"  
Jesus didn't follow the rules of etiquette too closely  
when it came to dinner parties!

In fact, says Campbell, Jesus' last supper was no isolated incident but,  
rather, the culmination of the radical table ministry  
that Jesus enacted throughout his life (51).

Dinner parties in Jesus' culture were not private gatherings,  
but very public rituals...  
so that everyone could see who was important, who had status.

Important people got the places of honour—  
close to the head of the table, where their host was seated,  
and where the better food and wine were served.

The host made sure to invite some less important folk, too—

to sit in the lowlier places and eat the cheaper food,  
just to make the distinctions clear.  
Going out to dinner was all about honour and shame.  
Meals were “rituals of division” (Campbell).

Here, at *this* Table,  
Jesus shows us another way of being with one another.  
As we gather here,  
we too are enacting a public ritual  
so that everyone can see who’s important.  
At this dinner party, *everyone* is important.  
At this Table, there are no outsiders, no first and last, no beggars.  
This is the family feast of the whole people of God.

The family reunion lifts our spirits.  
We remember that we are loved and cherished.  
We tell our stories  
and remember why we are here and what we are about.  
We look into each other’s eyes as we pass the dishes,  
and we remember that we are family.  
As we eat the bread of life and drink the cup of blessing,  
together,  
we are nourished and made hale and hearty.  
So that, when we rise from the table,  
we carry with us the Spirit of hope and fellowship and good intentions,  
the fruit of our communion together.

Are we ready to celebrate?  
We are invited—each one of us, all of us—  
to the party of a lifetime!  
The guest list is endless,  
but the invitation is personal and intimate, for *you*, for *me*.  
Please come, says our ever-gracious Host.  
Please come....  
I have spread the table for you.

Amen.

