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What's in a Meal?

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What's in a Meal?

Michael Ditmore

Early on in our Sunday evening Bible studies on experiencing Christ in community, we looked at the story of Mary and Martha. For that occasion I posed a sharing question for our group in this way: In your household, who prepares the meals? Well, I was a bit new at this teaching method, but I learned. The answers surprised me, because in my naiveté I honestly never dreamed that so simple and innocent a question could so quickly rouse marital strife and rancor. I'd just assumed that the gender roles in everyone else's household were equally divided, that we all equally shared the responsibilities for planning, shopping for, preparing, and then cleaning up after our meals, but I found out that about the only part of meals that we shared fifty-fifty on a consistent basis was their consumption. Fortunately, we had this discussion in a loving, caring Christian community. I was personally comforted to discover that the imbalance in my own household wasn't all that unusual. But more importantly, I was reminded of how easily we who mostly consume meals take for granted the thought and effort that goes into them and of how thankless a task it can be, not only to

put a meal together, but to clean up the kitchen afterward.

As we will see a little later this morning, in the early church the daily distribution of food swiftly became a very sensitive issue, one that threat-

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ened to divide the Christian community in Jerusalem between the Aramaic-speaking Jews and the Grecian Jews, who felt their widows were being overlooked. In response, the apostles appointed seven men "known to be full of Spirit and wisdom," one of whom was Steven, to attend to distributing food. I guess it's hard for me sometimes to under-

stand how it is that something so simple and common and mundane and biological as a meal should loom so prominently and significantly throughout the Bible—but it does so everywhere. Here, for instance, concerns over food threatened to split the community.

Last week, our guest speaker pointed out to us not only the significance of manna to the Exodus, but also the significance of the moment when God stopped giving the manna to eat. In our Bible studies, we have encountered this theme in several ways. After the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, the disciples urged Jesus to "eat something," to which he replied, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Or consider the journey to Emmaus—Cleopas and his unnamed companion walked a considerable distance with the risen Christ, apparently discussing him the whole way; they were in his very presence, but they failed to recognize him until "he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him."

In our communion meal this morning, we have the opportunity to

see and recognize our risen Lord and savior, to know that he is with us, that he is in our presence and we are in his. And as we do so, it is important to reflect on the preparations that went into this humble-appearing feast, on how we got this banquet spread out before us. I'm not talking about the earthly hands that took the time and trouble to get the trays and fill them with bread and fill the cups with fruit of the vine or the hands that are about to take the trays and serve them to you or the hands that will take the trays and clean up afterward, although these people are often anonymous and unappreciated, and they richly deserve our gratitude. Instead, I am thinking of the heavenly preparation.

Edward Taylor was a Puritan minister who, for over forty years, approached communion with such seriousness that he composed a brief poetic meditation each time to help prepare his heart and spirit for this sacred act, to help himself understand how the whole agonized and loving history of God, Christ, and humanity intermingle in this one moment. I think Taylor understood that, in part, communion means sharing things in common—between God and man in Christ, and between ourselves. Bear with Taylor's some-

what extravagant imagination; he explained the preparation of the meal in these words on June 4, 1684. First, he reminds himself of the fallen state of humanity, that we are all in desperate need of God's grace, emblemized by the bread; we are like a "Bird of Paradise" that has flung "Away its Food" and has fallen into "Celestial! Famine sore." No food the world offers can satisfy its hunger. Then he speaks of God's mercy and grace, that he undertook to make a meal to quench our hunger by giving up his son for us:

In this sad state, Gods Tender
Bowells run
Out streams of Grace: And to end
all strife
The Purest Wheate in Heaven,
his dear Son
Grinds, and kneads up into this
Bread of Life.
Which Bread of Life from
Heaven down came and
stands
Disht on thy Table up by Angells
Hands.

Did God mould up this Bread in
Heaven, and bake,
Which from this Table came, and
to thine goeth?
Doth he bespeake thee thus, This

Soule Bread take.
Come Eat thy fill of this thy
Gods White Loafe?
Its Food too fine for Angells, yet
come, take
And Eat thy fill. Its Heavens
Sugar Cake.

If you've ever baked bread, you know that it is a violent, laborious activity. I've never ground up wheat into flour, but I know that kneading the dough involves pummeling and slapping and pushing and pulling. And then baking the bread requires intense heat to transform the dough into something tasty and edible. But this simple, daily activity of baking bread, Taylor would have us understand, parallels in a homely way the violence and pain of the crucifixion, which results, as Jesus explained to the crowd in the Gospel of John, not in "food that spoils, but . . . food that endures to eternal life, . . . the true bread from heaven." Let us join together in feasting on heaven's sugar cake.

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