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The Family Recipe: A Sermon in Response to "Personalized vs. Parallel Eating"

HEATHER E. HOLLAND

We know from the Gospels that Jesus was in high demand as a dinner guest. We also know our lives have been deeply shaped by Jesus, the Host. But I suspect that Jesus may well have been a very good cook, because he knew something about recipes, this one in particular: strangers plus food makes family. He uses this recipe as a directive for sending out the seventy-two disciples in Luke 10.4–7, but he includes only a dash of instruction on soul winning. He tells them, "This is going to be difficult and dangerous. Don't take a bag (provisions), a purse (money) or sandals (comforts)." In other words, this is no luxury journey where you will be in control of the details. He adds, "When you come into a house, say, 'Peace be upon you,' and whatever they share with you, eat."

Extend peace to everyone they would meet and eat whatever was put in front of them? You mean these disciples weren't instructed to go only to the house of Israel where they might be welcomed, remain ceremonially clean and then be able to stock up on what they and every other Jew in the nation would normally eat? And they weren't to pack their own acceptable, Jewish, traditional, kosher food? It doesn't look like it. Furthermore, in Luke 10.13–15, Jesus commends the potential faithful response of Gentile cities over against the potential unfaithful response of Jewish cities. In short, Jesus is sending his disciples out to whomever will receive them and to whomever will listen, whether Jew or Gentile.

In the Luke 10 passage, understood by many to be the introduction of Jesus' call to evangelize the nations, Jesus has a lot more to say to these disciples about *how* to go out than he does about *what* to say when they get there. He tells these seventy-two disciples, "Eat what is set before you; cure the sick...and say to them, 'the Kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10.8–9).¹ That's it: no money, provisions, or even a change of clothes. So what *does* Jesus recommend they take? What surefire tool of evangelization *are* they to pack along? As it turns out, a good appetite.

Really? Basically, I think Jesus just has commanded them to go out and eat. Go out and eat, eat and talk, talk and tell stories, the stories that give witness to Jesus and then—*voilà*—"strangers plus food makes family." Come and get it! Hungry strangers become well-fed friends and life is shared: life-sustaining food for the body and life-sustaining food for the soul. Literally, soul food.

Yet there is more here than the beauty and intimacy born from sharing a meal together. Jesus sends these folks out vulnerable, hat in hand, and at the mercy of the very people with whom they long to share a saving message. These disciples are going out with the most important message in the history of the world but without the means one would normally utilize for power and control. They are not the teachers of the law, scribes, or landholders. They are not the chosen, the rich, or the elite. They are not the ceremonially clean nor in any fashion the center of the known world. They're hungry, and they're strangers. This unexpected mixture of ingredients is not your run-of-the-mill recipe for success! Nevertheless, Jesus seems to be setting the table for how the message will be served and consumed from now on.

1. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Eat whatever they provide you? What kind of message does that send to the disciples about who they are to be in relationship to the world? And doesn't the way in which they come to the world say something to the world about who these people are and what they have to say? Jesus wants them to *speak* the message, and he wants them to *be* the message.

How the disciples go out communicates something about the God who is coming near. And by opening up their hands to the world, they—like their Teacher and YHWH before them—take the gamble of being misunderstood, mistaken and mistreated. But hasn't that always been the risk that love takes?

Hungry strangers. It's a common theme in the Bible and in the world. Adam and Eve act like strangers in a garden where they have already been welcomed, eating the only thing they are not offered and in doing so, steal, lie and reject the very hospitality they so arrogantly demand. Isn't it interesting that in eating, their eyes are opened to what they had just lost?² The Israelites are wandering, complaining, hungry strangers in the desert. Yet they are fed from heaven by their God who always knows exactly where they are and was never going to let them starve. On the other hand, Abraham faithfully puts it all together and shows great hospitality by welcoming the three strangers, washing their feet and inviting them to break bread with him. They in turn give him the blessing he has been waiting for. He and his wife Sarah are to have a son! They are not lost! There is a future; there is a way. And now Jesus, whom the authorities describe as "this fellow [who] welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15.2), sends out his followers hungry and seeking hospitality with the message of how to be truly filled.

I am pretty sure that being hungry and unknown would not qualify in the contemporary church as an excellent missional methodology. And I am actually fairly certain that vulnerability is not considered a desirable attribute for achievement in any field. But that is exactly what God calls for because that is exactly who God is.

God doesn't show up with might and fanfare. God is the welcoming one. God is the one, according to Leonardo Boff, who is "weak in power but strong in love."³ We see God's love and hospitality when God hears the cries of the Israelites and sends a strange Israelite-turned-royal-Egyptian-turned-shepherd to offer Pharaoh the opportunity to show hospitality and release them. We see the vulnerable God in the despised prophet Hosea who again and again takes to himself his unfaithful wife Gomer, which is an image of God risking love for people. Finally, God sends out God's own son as a stranger: a babe born to a poor, young girl in a manner perceived by many to be questionable at best.

God does not show up as the winner who takes the spoils; God is often the stranger. And this is good news for all of us strangers. First-century Jews found themselves strangers in their own land due to Roman occupation. Gentiles were treated as strangers by their Jewish counterparts, but the apostle Paul says that they were precious to God: a wild olive shoot grafted into the lovingly cultivated olive tree (Rom 11.17).

Here is the lesson for the disciple of Jesus Christ: only God's grace will satisfy the gnawing human hunger to belong, to know and to be known. And God's heart is with those who reside on the edges, with those whom other people find strange.

I lived this truth not long ago when I was driving my family home from vacation, and my husband became seriously ill. We stopped at a large convenience store because his illness worsened. My husband tried to walk into the store but failed. I was helpless and stood next to our car openly weeping along with both of my children. Hurried vacationers, who looked a lot like me, in their very nice SUVs, darted around us to get inside, pay for gas, grab a Coke and get back on the Interstate. It seemed we were invisible to them. But a man called to me from the beat-up car next to mine. He spoke gently and kindly to me, asking if we were all right. I was moved beyond words, and I could only tearfully respond by thanking and telling him that my husband was ill, but we were all okay. He nodded and smiled but didn't seem to believe me. Though I had not doubted God's presence with us that day, I knew in that moment that we were not alone and that our needs would certainly be met. It takes a stranger who has been in need to recognize a stranger who is in need.

2. N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 163.

3. Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 27.

I believe Jesus' method of sending out hungry strangers to share peace and to eat with others was intended as an important kingdom teaching to those first messengers and to us. Not only is this a gracious and humble manner in which to approach the world, but it is also the model for how to conduct ourselves among the people of God. In very short order the fledgling early church will initiate eating, living and sharing together as family where they had previously only been strangers. It is easy to imagine the difficulty of those first few shaky attempts at a shared meal between Jews and Gentiles. Oh, the tension and discomfort! Don't you know someone's conscience was offended? Don't you know someone was caused to stumble? But don't we know this was the will of God?! Did everyone bring their own food and sit in their own space like an audience at an outdoor concert? "Stay off my blanket and eat your own sandwich. Thank you very much." It would not be a stretch of the imagination to envision Gentile Christians as those who were either treated as strangers or who at least felt like strangers among those who questioned whether it was scriptural to allow the outsiders to...fill in the blank here with whatever you believe that others in the church should not be doing.

We have precious few details of how the early church navigated the rough waters of race, ethnicity, class and inclusion. But we know they must have figured out how to be family and eat together somehow. Because somebody somewhere found the courage to risk sharing while someone else took the risk of receiving that crust of bread and that sip of wine. Again, doesn't love always take the risk? The very thing that had separated them now united them. Food had been a barrier but now food was, well, Jesus. It helps to remember that this great enterprise, the church, didn't belong to them any more than it belongs to us. Truth is, we all belong to it. This is the place where we welcome and we share without regard for our own comfort or self-protection. It's terrifying, humbling and wonder-filled. This is the eucharistic edge: that liminal space where God lives and strangers become friends.

In Luke 24.13–35 we have the account of the journey to Emmaus. I believe that this is a mirror account of the sending out of the seventy-two in Luke 10. It is written not from the perspective of Jesus instructing followers on how they should go out, as in Luke 10, but from the perspective of disciples who are presented with the opportunity to receive the stranger and the stranger's message. This text provides a detailed fleshing out of the eternity-altering possibilities created when we possess an attitude of hospitality to others, both in the world and in the church. These texts are two sides of the same coin. Are we willing, like those disciples in Luke 10, to eat whatever is provided in order to proclaim the kingdom, and in so doing, open ourselves to new kingdom possibilities despite our long-held beliefs and religious practices? And will we also, like Cleopas and the other disciple, offer to give to another what has been graciously extended to us? Will we invite strangers to stay with us in the growing dark, believing that we can learn from them while sharing a crust of bread and sip of wine? It is only then that we will see the stranger transformed before our very eyes into our own family, or perhaps even the one so dear to us. And like Cleopas and friend, our eyes will be opened not to what we have lost, but by whom we have been found!

Can you smell the aroma of this blessing God has been cooking up all along? We are not lost. There is a future; there is a way. When the whole family sits down, and we all eat whatever God has provided, we will share a feast, and we will see Jesus. Peace be upon us! Amen.

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