

Proverbs 15: 15-17
John 13:31-35

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
November 7, 2021

What's for Dinner?

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today from the Book of Proverbs, wisdom can be seen by showing that one thing is better than another. Such “better than” sayings occur 26 times in Proverbs. And references to food and eating occur no less than 40 times. Our focus today is on the second one. In this one, wisdom is to value love and peace more than dinner fare and material things. Listen to these words from Proverbs 15:15-17...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

One of the amazing things about our Gospel Lesson today is its location in John's Gospel. For it comes on the heels of Judas' leaving the other disciples at the last supper, and we know what Judas is going to do. So Jesus talks about his being glorified. Through his death and resurrection, God will be glorified in Christ. And Jesus wants to prepare his disciples for what is to come. Therefore, in a new covenant he instructs them to love one another. Listen to these words from John 13:31-35...

Sermon

I like the King James Version of our proverb today:

“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

This proverb compares the simple fare of a dish of vegetables with the food of a rich man's feast. To have a fattened ox was about as special as it got in Israel. If you remember, the father of the prodigal son ordered that the fatted calf be served when his son came home. It was

a time of glorious celebration—and only the best was to be served. But vegetables, though not nearly as fancy as the fattened ox, are better when they are seasoned with love.

As a pastor for over 50 years, I've had the joy of sharing meals with families and individuals. Some of the most precious meals have been shared with people who were certainly not rich. The meals, though simple, were liberally seasoned with love, fellowship, and goodwill. It was a blessing to sit at such a table.

“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

The proverb calls up contrasting scenes in our minds. Here is a table set with the simplest of foods; no cloth does it grace, but around the table are people relishing a meal shared in love. There is a banquet table laden with the finest of meats, vegetables, fruits, and desserts. The silver and crystal are clean and sparkling, awaiting the commencement of the feast. The tablecloth is bright and white; you have to search to find a wrinkle. Servants stand watchful to our every need; no glass will go unreplenished. However, gloomy animosity clouds the room; no warmth of laughter is to be found. Table conversation is proper and cold. Doubt and suspicion pervade. No one reaches out to touch another. Amid the feast there is famine.

“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

Yes, a heavy-laden stomach is no compensation for a heavy heart. For the true worth of a meal does not lie only in what is on the table, but in what is in the hearts of the people who gather round the table. If they are in turmoil and conflict, no extravagant serving can make mealtime a desirable occasion. Even where people live in luxury, love—as Jesus indicated in the New Commandment—is a necessary ingredient.

I remember a Sunday meal following worship some 50 years ago, during my years at Columbia theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. You may remember my telling of it. I had an invitation to preach, and early on a Sunday morning Hazel and I had driven to a Presbyterian church near Farner, just over the Georgia/North Carolina border in Tennessee, above Ducktown and Turtletown.

The church was located in the coal-mining country and ugly reminders were in abundance. Yet in the unscarred areas you could see the beauty of the mountains. The church was small and rural. The backyard of the manse was actually the foot of a mountain, and I wondered if there was room for a garden there.

Following Worship, an elderly couple invited us to eat dinner with them. Up a winding gravel road we drove in our white, '61 straight shift Plymouth, to find a most humble dwelling. Inside we gathered around an old table with simple but delicious food. Following the blessing we enjoyed a meal with conversation of everyday life in that community.

When we had finished and were preparing to leave, the old couple presented us with a jar of sourwood honey with the comb inside. Not a little jar, mind you, but a great big jar. This was honey from hives tended by the hands of this mountain man, and given lovingly to us. Back in Decatur, I declared that I had never tasted better honey. And every time I see a jar of sourwood honey now, I think of that time one Sunday after church in the mountains of East Tennessee.

“Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

In an article entitled “Saying Goodbye: A Time of Personal Growth,” Craig Williams tells about his struggle to leave a church he had served for some 16 years. Therein does he trace those struggles back to his childhood. Unresolved issues of the past seemed to paralyze his present. Mr. Williams recalls an incident that was repeated over and over again:

As my oldest sister entered college, the friction in our family increased. It seemed that the only time we were all together was at dinner, and as a result dinner was a most unpleasant experience. The meal was usually never finished as the arguments between my sister and my dad frequently squelched our appetites. One of the things that happened was that my middle sister and I were not allowed to leave the table as the fight raged on. We sat there unable to finish, unable to leave, waiting for my father to conclude. Then we would escape to the refuge of our rooms. The paradigm was the image of a ten-year-old sitting at the table while a disapproving and angry father refused to let him leave.

What's for Dinner? Did it really matter? This was a meal without love and peace.

Of course, there are other meals that come to mind. The family meal at which the father was so blind to what was happening and pressed what he thought was harmless teasing to the point of creating humiliation and tears for one of the children.

Then there was the woman who told her minister about the time when in the midst of a lavish meal in a fancy restaurant, her husband informed her that there was someone else and that he would not be going home with her that evening.

Many couples learn the hard way that possessions do not bring happiness and peace to a relationship. A husband and wife may become rich enough to dine at exquisite restaurants, live in a huge house, buy expensive furnishings, and drive luxury cars. And yet, without love, their luxurious life will feel like a torture chamber.

But at this table of our Lord, by grace, we share a joyful common meal, a eucharistic act of thanksgiving in which the family of God gathers to remember, celebrate, receive, and pass on, the gifts of God's amazing grace. The Communion of Saints—the spiritual union of the members of Christ's church, on earth, and in heaven. The host, the One who invites us to come to the table, is the same One who was sent by the Father's love. Our Host is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Who gave his life for us, that we might have life. He said,

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Somewhere I read about the experience of a minister who was approached by a member of his church, an elderly man, a loyal layman given to deep devotion and constant faithfulness to the life of the church, but not given to sophisticated theological jargon.

“Preacher,” he began, “I want you to correct my thinking.”

“How’s that?” responded the minister.

“Last week, during communion, I had a strange feeling, a funny notion, and I want you to set me straight about it.”

“What happened?”

“It was when the little pieces of bread were being passed around. You had said something about this being a feast for God’s family, and when I took the bread I began to think that we weren’t the only ones here. I felt that my mother and father were here, too. In my mind I saw my brother, Sam, and my grandparents, and all those who’ve gone before me. Preacher, I know all those people are dead and gone, and I’ll see them in heaven someday, but I couldn’t get them out of my mind. I felt they were right there at that table last Sunday with us. It was a good feeling, preacher, but I know I need you to straighten me out.”

“No, I don’t need to straighten you out,” said the minister slowly. “What you felt was true. We call it the communion of the saints—I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins....”

Better is a dinner of grape juice and bread where love is...

May Jesus’ imperative about love, our proverb, and the experience of this joyful service of remembrance, and enable us to appreciate what makes for a truly joyful meal. It’s not sumptuous foods and fine china, but the people gathered with us at table. The people whose lives we share, the love possible within those moments of fellowship. May God give us such wisdom that we will be able to savor the grace of all these times. Until we feast again with him in glory. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.