

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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John 21:1-19

Feed and Love

One way you can always tell that our adult children will soon be coming home for a visit is if you look in our refrigerator. Others who have reached what is sometimes called the “empty nest” stage of life may especially understand this. And in addition to the empty nest, Debbie and I have also reached the “almost constantly considering which are the right things to eat and how much of them” stage of life. Consequently, the quantity as well as the variety of food in our refrigerator is often limited. But this past Thursday evening, after Debbie stopped at the grocery store on her way home from work, I opened the refrigerator and found it filled to the brim with really good stuff: sliced lunch meat, ham and chicken and potato salad, and one of my favorites— string cheese. You see, Jill and April also like string cheese. There were also cookies in the cookie jar, and pretzels and chips in the cupboard.

Sometimes when Debbie fills up the kitchen in preparation for a weekend full house, I get in trouble. A lot of that food is off limits to me. It is for when the kids are here, or for the company that is coming. Sometimes, knowing how I might get into the wrong stuff, Debbie will separate what is permissible to consume from what is not. Then she will get my attention so that there can be no misunderstanding and say clearly to me, *whatever is on the middle shelf or the top shelf in the refrigerator you can eat, the rest is for when everyone gets here*. Of course, my shelf usually does not look as good as the others. It amazes me sometimes, how one spouse often knows what the other is up to. Debbie will be in the family room and I will sort of quietly glide into the kitchen knowing there is some good food in there now. I will open the refrigerator door which doesn't squeak or make a sound, but still from the family room will come just at the right moment, *don't eat all the string cheese!* How does she do that?

At our house there were always favorite meals on your birthday. For supper, one got whatever one wanted on one's birthday. It is the same today. If you are at our house on your birthday, you will be served your favorite meal. And almost everyone in American society shares in the tradition of serving and eating birthday cake.

On special occasions at least, it seems to me that food for our bodies is often connected to food for our hearts and souls. We connect food with happy times, celebration times, loving times. There is something spiritually nurturing about being around a table eating with others. If someone voluntarily provides food for someone else, it might feel to the provider and receiver alike as a gift of love. Even though the idea is not always spoken the experience may be universal.

This is one reason I like pot lucks at church so much. Everybody provides food for everyone else. In that way everyone nurtures everyone else and everyone receives the gift of food from everyone else, and so, in this way, I believe everyone feels loved by everyone else. It is a wonderful way for a Christian community to live in the manner of Christ together. A pot luck is a richer experience than say having a church meal catered by someone from outside the church who is paid for his or her service. There is nothing wrong with that, it is just as good for our bodies, but maybe not as good for our souls.

Twice a year, once during Advent and once during Lent, Ineke (Connecticut Conference Northern Regional Minister) offers the clergy in our region an opportunity to attend worship and communion together. She often follows it with a homemade soup and bread lunch which she prepares. There are times when after these worship events, instead of the soup, we all go to a restaurant together for lunch. That is fine. But when Ineke makes soup, it's even better.

Perhaps we are getting the idea here.

The New Testament is replete with stories which include a meal. There is the story of the sisters Mary and Martha, when Jesus was in their home for a meal, and Martha wanted Jesus to send Mary into the kitchen to help with preparations, but Mary was listening to Jesus teach in another room, and Jesus replied, *Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about so many things, but only one is needed and Mary has chosen it. (Luke 10:41)* The story of the loaves and the fishes might also come to mind. Crowds were gathered to hear Jesus preach, and the disciples became anxious about the situation. *Master, there are thousands here and they will soon be hungry. Tell them to go home and get something to eat.* But before Jesus had them pass around the meager five loaves and three fishes that they were able to gather from the crowd, he said to the disciples, *you give them something to eat! (Luke 9:12,13)* Wow! Was that ever a loaded statement and forecast of a command to come! You feed them. You love them. Then there was the metaphorical language Jesus used with the Syrophenician woman. She was not a Jew, but begged Jesus nevertheless to heal her small daughter. Jesus said that it was not right to take the children's food and give it to the dogs. And she replied, *but even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their Master's table. (Matthew 15:27)* And Jesus told her that for that answer which showed such confidence in the goodness of God, she could go home, for her daughter was healed.

And as one of the final things that Jesus did with the disciples was to share a last supper with them, one of the final things the resurrected Christ did with the disciples was to share a meal with them... a meal of fish and bread likely enough, this one in the morning, what could be called the last breakfast.

The story of the last breakfast begins with the risen Christ appearing to the disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee when they were out on the water fishing. The disciples had returned to their accustomed manner of life. Although Jesus had appeared to them prior to this, they were still doing what they had done before they met him, perhaps they were individually better for having known him, we might hope so, but what

they were doing with their lives was not much different for it. Apparently they needed another visit from the risen Lord. From the shore Jesus called to them, throw your net over to the other side of the boat for a catch, and they did, and they caught so many fish that the net almost tore. Then they discovered it was Jesus who had said it, and Peter was so excited that he jumped overboard and swam immediately to shore, the others coming in after him as quickly as they could in a boat overloaded with fish. Jesus met them all on the shore and he had a charcoal fire going over which he was roasting appropriately enough, a meal of fish and bread. And Jesus invited them to add some of the fish they had just caught, and said, come and have breakfast.

Might we imagine how hungry those disciples were? They had been out on the lake in the early hours, rowing and pulling on nets and breathing the cool morning air. And there was the living Christ cooking for them after helping them to provide food and provision for themselves by catching fish. How welcoming that net full of fish would have been for them! How welcoming the breakfast! And how typical of Jesus to first provide an example of what he wanted them to do.

After feeding their bodies, now it was time also to feed Peter's soul. Peter was the one who denied three times even knowing his Savior and Lord and Best Friend. Peter was three times ashamed of himself, three times guilty, three times caught in the net of his own humanness. So the questions and answers came. Peter, do you love me? Yes, Lord you know that I love you. Three times came the question, three times the affirmation— not that Christ needed it, the divine love for Peter was certain and forgiveness was granted as soon as the denial was made. But Peter needed the repetition. Peter needed to reaffirm his love for Christ three times. Until then Peter was stuck where he was, fishing for fish, as were the others. They needed still to become the first church and begin its mission, and they needed to know that God still wanted the likes of them to do it.

We might hear Jesus say this morning, that the world now is tired and hungry too, Peter, James, John. You feed them. You are different now for knowing me and so the purpose of your lives is different too. I am the bread of life. You feed them. You love them. If you do one you will do the other. They go together. One brings the other. You feed them. You love them. Feed and Love. Feed and love. Feed and love.