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Bridge Street United Church

March 28, 2024

Rev. Dr. John H. Young

Readings: I Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:12-26

Of Meals and Memory

Getting together for a festive occasion with family members or friends usually involves food. It may be a full-blown meal, or it may simply be some calorie-laden goodies passed around at a strategic point during the get-together. Food and such gatherings do go together.

But other family or community gatherings have a meal as a much more central element. At wedding receptions, for example, a meal is usually served, at least in our culture here in Canada. It is an occasion around which family members and friends of the couple being married gather over food, with conversation and sharing taking place. Family members will often gather around a significant birthday, and, around an accompanying meal, memories and thoughts are exchanged. At Christmas, or Thanksgiving, or Easter, people often gather with family members and friends for a meal. Around the table, there is chatter, memories are shared, and relationships are deepened.

I recall from my childhood many gatherings of my extended family on my paternal grandmother's farm. She was the undisputed matriarch of the family, a group one might more accurately have described as a clan. For all members of the extended family, the farm where she lived, with an aunt and uncle of mine, was simply known as "down home." Most summer weekends, some portion of the extended family gathered there every Saturday evening. For an eight or nine year old boy, most of the **lengthy** conversations that followed dinner were

exceedingly boring. I would much, much rather have been throwing my red, white, and blue rubber ball against the hip-roofed barn roof, thus improving my skills at catching pop flies, than listening to the adults reminiscing about old times. But the family rule was that I had to stay at the table until, at a certain point in the evening, I was released to go outside, even as the adults continued to chat around the table.

Though I was usually impatient to have these sessions end, or at least to be released from them, it was around those meals and the conversations that followed that I learned my family traditions. Some of those conversations seemed incredibly boring then, though I am much more charitable about them now, indeed wish I could remember more from some of them. Others, even then, seemed quite interesting. Most interesting of all to me then was learning, when I was about eight, that my father and a brother who was two years older than my Dad, while they were boys about my age at the time, had trained the family dog, a collie, to sit on a chair at the kitchen table and drink soup from a cereal bowl they put in front of him. I was deeply impressed. It was a side of my father I had not seen before. I gather my grandmother was less impressed by what I thought was a quite remarkable example of canine training. I know my mother, as we were driving home, nixed the idea of my trying this trick with my dog Buddy, after I spoke admiringly of what my Dad and his brother had done and wondered aloud whether Buddy would be able to learn this same trick.

But it was around the kitchen and the dining room tables on the farm that I learned the family history and traditions. All those relatives of my father's generation dead. The farm is long since gone, the woodland section of the farm, in whose trails I used to walk and explore, clearcut by the subsequent owner. But the farm and the family traditions, both the things I experienced

myself, and the things of which I heard around those meals about events long before I was born, became part of me. They live on in my memory and are an integral part of who I am.

Those thoughts came back to me as I thought about this service and what it is we commemorate tonight, namely, that last meal Jesus had with his disciples. It came back to me because of the link in this story between a meal and memory, the link between what happens around a table when friends gather for a meal, and how traditions are developed, and memories passed on. When my extended family gathered around the table and shared memories, they reminded themselves again of their common history, of what made them a group, in this particular case, a close, extended family.

What Jesus and his followers did that night was not exactly the same thing, though there are some points of resemblance. They gathered to do something that their Jewish ancestors had then been doing for about twelve hundred years, something that Jews still do. While in this story from Mark's Gospel Jesus knew that this night would be different, he and his followers had gathered, as faithful Jews still gather, to celebrate Passover. That feast, then as now, commemorated the escape of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The gathering, with the meal that stands at its centre, was an act by which Jews in Jesus' day, and Jews to this day, "remember" something that happened long before they were born. As they eat that special meal, they hear again, both through words and through the symbols of the meal, this story, their history, and it becomes their story. Indeed, it becomes, quite literally, their story. For Jesus and his followers, as they gathered that night, it was a meal that not only reminded them of that story and helped to make it their story but it was also a meal and a gathering that reminded them of God's love for them and of their link to one another as Jews.

For us, as Christians, tonight is a similar occasion. It is a time when a meal and memory come together. We gather because of who Jesus was and what he and his followers did that night. We gather to hear that story because it is our story. The story read thus far, and the passages yet to be read tomorrow and then on Sunday, recount events that both set in motion, and shaped, our tradition. But it is not only in hearing the story but also in our partial re-enactment of the events of that night, in our breaking bread together and sharing juice from a common pitcher, that we are put in touch with our roots as a Christian community. It is in these ways that we remember. It is in these ways that this story becomes our story.

But something else happens, too, especially this night. In that breaking and that sharing, we are reminded that we have a common tradition, a common story, that we are one community. As we commune together this night, may our sense of community, with God and with one another grow. And to our God, who meets us tonight in this special way, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.