

Devoted to Breaking Bread

Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Nine)

“They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

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(Acts 20:7)*

Message:

We’re re-imagining the 21st century Church in light of the 1st century Church. We’re imagining what the Church might look like, should look like, if we take the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in us seriously.

This month in our annual focus, we looking at the early Church’s Rule of Life - their practices that kept them walking close to Jesus and empowered by His Spirit. Two weeks ago we talked about being fully devoted to the *apostle’s teaching* - that is, to the Gospel, to God’s Word. Then last Sunday, we looked at being fully devoted to the *fellowship*, to the community, to *koinonia* (i.e., our/together life). This morning, we’re looking at being fully devoted to the *breaking of bread*, something many see as a reference to the Lord’s Supper, but it is so much more.

Read: Acts 2:42 - *“They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* **Acts 20:7** - *“On the first day of the week we came together to break bread...”*

A well-known storyteller (Garrison Keillor) tells the following story:

“In the church I grew up, there was a spirit of self-righteousness among some members that defied peace-making. They were given to disputing small points of doctrine that to them seemed the very fulcrum of the faith. We were cursed with a surplus of scholars and a deficit of peacemakers. We tended to be divisive and split into factions.”

“One dispute had to do with the question of showing hospitality towards those who were in doctrinal error. In other words, if you showed kindness to somebody who held false doctrine, are you implicated in that person’s false doctrine - kind of guilt by association. Uncle Al had family and friends on both sides of this so-called ‘cup of cold water debate,’ and it broke his heart.”

“The dispute was really between brother William Miller and brother James Johnson, who dragged others into it. One fine August day, Uncle Al tried to make peace between these two marble-heads and prevent a great deal of unhappiness for the rest of us.”

“He arranged for them to meet at his and Aunt Flo's one Sunday, a few Millerites and a few Johnsonians - not to discuss the hospitality-to-error doctrine, but simply to enjoy a dinner of Aunt Flo's famous fried chicken. It took weeks to arrange. Uncle Al worked through an intermediary, Brother Fields, who had never shown hospitality to anyone, whether in error or not, and who therefore was neutral on the question.”

“Finally one Sunday they arrived in two cars - both Fords - the brethren being united on the General Motors question. Out climbs slowly some gaunt, flinty-eyed, thin-lipped men in dark floppy suits, and their plump, obedient wives, and they came into the house and sat in awesome silence in the living room until the call to dinner, and they tramped in around the long dining room table, extended with two leaves, so they wouldn't have to sit close.”

“And the Millerites and the Johnsonians bowed their heads in prayer. Prayer was a delicate matter. Brethren were known to use even prayer before a meal as a platform. And so, Al the peacemaker, concerned lest one brother take prayer and beat the other over the head with it, said, ‘Let us bow our heads in silent prayer, giving thanks for the meal.’ And they bowed their heads and closed their eyes, and a long time passed. The old clock ticked on the bureau; a cat walked in, meowed and left; a child snickered and was stifled; cars went by; there were dry sniffs and throat clearings, and soon it was clear that neither side wanted to stop before the other; they were seeing who could pray the longest.”

Brother Miller peeked through his fingers at Brother Johnson, who was earnestly engaged in silent communion with the Lord, who agreed with him on so many things. His forehead almost touched the plate, so Brother Miller dove back into prayer, and the other brethren stayed under too, sneaking glances around the table to see if anyone else noticed how long it was.”

“Minutes drifted by, heads stayed bowed; nobody would come up. To stop praying might imply a weakness in faith. Al said, ‘Amen,’ to offer them a way out of the deadlock, and said it again, ‘Amen!’”

“Brother Miller looked up and saw Johnson still bowed, so he went back down... just as Johnson put his prayer-scope up and saw Brother Miller submerged, so down he went. It was becoming the longest table grace in history. It ground on and on and on; then finally Aunt Flo slid her chair back, rose, went into the kitchen, and brought out the food that they were competing to see who could be more thankful for.”

“She set the hay down where the goats could get it. Tears ran down Brother Johnson's face. His eyes were clamped shut, and tears streamed down, and so was Brother Miller weeping. It's true what they say, that smell is the key that unlocks our deepest memories. And with their eyes closed, the smell of fried chicken and gravy made both those men into boys again.”

“It was years ago they were fighting, and a mother's voice from on high said, ‘You two stop it and get in here and have your dinners - now! I mean it!’ The blessed cornmeal crust and rapturous gravy brought the memory to mind, and the stony hearts of the two giants melted. And they raised their heads and filled their plates, and slowly peace was made over that glorious chicken.”

The phrase, “*devoted...to breaking bread,*” like “*devoted...to the apostle’s teaching,*” and “*devoted...to the fellowship*”, is about more than a periodic event, it is about a lifestyle, about a worldview, about how we are to **live our life**.

Listen to what Luke writes:

--**Luke 22:14** - “*When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table...*”

--**Luke 22:29-30**, Jesus: “*I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom...*”

--**Luke 24:30** - “*When he was at table with them [Jesus] took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*”

The Biblical phrase “*To break bread together,*” continues to underscore the **power** of a **meal** to forge relationships, bury anger, and differences and even provoke laughter.” **God** designed his family to be a place “*devoted to [coming together for the] breaking bread...*”

COME TO THE TABLE

Talking about the table, recognizing that this is not everyone’s experience; and recognizing it may raise some painful memories that the family of God is called to minister to.

First, the Table plays a very **familiar place in our lives.**

In 2014, an issue of *National Geographic* explored how sharing food together has always been part of the human story. It pointed to a cave near Tel Aviv where Archeologists found evidence of ancient meals prepared at a (supposed) 300,000-year-old hearth where diners gathered to eat together. They found a circular loaf of bread baked with scored marks to be divided,

One of the first things Marilyn and I bought together was a dining table and chairs. It has been a focal point of our daily lives for over forty years! Eating breakfast in the morning, lunch at noon, dinner in the evening. The kids colored, did homework, played games and constructed puzzles on that table. The table has been visually and virtually at the center of our home.

Second, the Table is an intimate **family gathering place.**

Norman Rockwell, cover artist for the *Saturday Evening Post* for over 46 years, painted a picture entitled, “Freedom from Want” - an emotional scene of a family gathering at grandfather’s house for a sumptuous turkey dinner. The sight, smell and heart all combine to present the dream we all long for in our own families - yet, so infrequently enjoy.

The food has been prepared with the love and memories of generations who have each left their mark on recipes with secret ingredients. Everyone, from youngest to oldest participates in the conversation; everyone talks at once; yet everyone hears what everyone is saying. In the conversation we retell the stories and celebrate the events

we've shared that make us family; stories we've told hundreds of times, but tell again because they never grow old.

Initially there were two at our table, then three, four, and five...and often some of their friends...now it's mostly two again; but periodically, there are fifteen or even more.

Presence is important; the gathering is planned, anticipated, and **cherished**. Periodically we've invited the extended family - that can be over thirty! Fact is, everyone around the table is considered to be - at least during the meal - **family**.

Third, the Table is the place where food is shared.

I love to eat. This should come as no surprise to anyone. Especially dessert! (It should actually be served first!).

Food is graciously shared by the host/hostess with all those at the table. When people drop in, or are invited last moment, it's always stretched to go around. The food provides physical nourishment; substance that provides **replenishment**, and renewal of our **strength**.

And while the food is nourishing; so is fellowship; relationships develop and deepen. Truth is, eating is much less fun when done alone; my dad and my grandfather regularly said, "*It always taste better when we eat together.*" And in every culture, and throughout history, a meal establishes the **common** life and rhythm.

Fourth, the Table is the place for feasting.

When the family comes on Sunday, my wife puts out the best meal of the week (Marilyn usually makes enough I can usually enjoy eating leftovers for days!). There is meat (sometimes two), potatoes, multiple vegetables, rolls, sometimes an appetizer, often a salad, and always desert - eaten on the best dishes. We feast! Marilyn tries to have something everyone likes so no one will walk away hungry and everyone will remember the joy of having been together.

Even when times are tough, the urge to celebrate at the table is still there. In the Antarctic in 1902, during Robert Falcon Scott's *Discovery* expedition, the men prepared a fancy meal for Midwinter Day, the shortest day and longest night of the year. Hefty provisions had been brought on board. Forty-five sheep were slaughtered. The cold, the darkness, and the isolation were forgotten for a while. "*With such a dinner,*" Scott wrote, "*we all agreed that life, even in the Antarctic Regions, was worth living.*"

Fifth, the Table is marked by faithfulness.

Marilyn has put meals on the table almost everyday - for over forty-five years. While I can't remember many specific meals; I've never walked away hungry.

The family knows they can come and be fed - anytime. When our family gathers, there is usually a table of food. And when there is the promise of a table full of food, the family usually comes together.

Sixth, the Table is the place where forgiveness (and grace) are offered.

To come to the table is to set aside your **personal** agenda and whatever it is - jobs, busy schedules, political - even religious - differences, varying priorities - that so frequently keep us apart. To eat together is to be **one**; it is difficult, if not impossible, to share a meal side by side and still retain anger, bitterness, and contempt for the one you're eating with.

The association of **food** with **love** is affirmed and continues throughout our life.

Seventh, and finally, the Table is the place where favor and blessing are extended.

When the sun goes down on Sabbath, Jewish families traditionally gather around table. The father, serving as the "priest" in the home, stands before his wife and blesses her (often singing) and then one by one speaks blessing over his children.

I am blessed when my family comes to the table. I am honored by their presence. I bless my children. And they bless each other simply by being together... When we're together, we acknowledge being the family we are. We're all blessed!

THE POWER OF TABLE

That's what God wants his church to be. The early church was; they broke bread together; they were family; they didn't all agree on everything, but they were one.

Children love to mimic the rituals of adults - actually, it seems to come quite naturally. They make mud pies; they hold tea parties; they cook and serve pretend food; they trade snacks to make friends - they quickly learn the **intimacy** of table.

This is what Jesus had in mind when he called us around the table and said, "*This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me...*" (**1 Cor. 11:24**). Some broken bread and a cup of wine. They are the simplest of elements...

And in addition to reminding us what Jesus did for us on the cross, those two simple elements have the power to get us to the Table...**together** - just like Jesus brought his closest friends together on that last night...

In our remembering, these simple elements provide us with the **ultimate comfort food...**

We recalled these **memories** of God's presence when the biopsy came back positive, when we lost our job, when we were standing by our children's grave, when we had our children baptized... They remind us we have been **redeemed**, forgiven, and **embraced** by God because of his Son's sacrifice and we now are his **sons** and **daughters - his family**.

In inviting his family to regularly gather around Table God invites us to experience his **fellowship**, grace, **healing**, love, **forgiveness**, and unity. The power of breaking bread together is found in a **transformed** life, a **changed** destiny, and **family** worth belonging to.

Betty and Phoebe are “family” who, until just a few years ago, had never met.

Betty, an African-American, grew up in Virginia, the daughter of a share-cropper. Phoebe, Caucasian, grew up in Baltimore, the daughter of a doctor. Betty attended a newly desegregated school; Phoebe a private girls school. Betty is the granddaughter of slaves; Phoebe is a descendant of the “owners” of Betty’s grandparents.

Betty had faced racism attending Warren County High School. Gunshots routinely riddled their home; their dog was poisoned; racial slurs were hurled; spitballs were pelted. In restaurants she observed white families praying and wondered, “Are they for real? Do they really love God like we do?” She wrote a book on her experiences.

Reading Betty’s book, Phoebe realized it was her family that had “owned” Betty’s grandparents and on January 15, 2007, Phoebe sent Betty an email - *“My name is Phoebe Kilby, and I am white. Martin Luther King had a dream that the sons and daughters of former slaves and slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table...maybe we as daughters can help fulfill that dream.”*

Betty emailed back: “Hello, cousin!”

They spoke by phone. When Betty invited Phoebe to the family dinner, Betty’s brothers asked her, *“Why would you want to have dinner with those who held our loved ones in bondage?”*

Phoebe was surprised when Betty invited her to dinner. Betty was surprised when Phoebe asked what she could do to make amends - it was the last thing she thought a white person would do. It shouldn't be so surprising; it's what tables are for. They both admit they had misperceptions of each other. Wounds were healed. A deep friendship resulted.

Together they have traveled the country speaking for the Eastern Mennonite University’s *Coming to the Table* ministry. (Table = Taking America Beyond the Legacy of Enslavement)

The table reminds us, “We are **family.” Eating together says, “We are **one family** in Jesus.”**

Breaking Bread is an opportunity for us to experience **who we truly are**. So the early church came to break bread and celebrate their Lord, their family, their unity, their forgiveness, their salvation, and their common faith.

The early Church, *“devoted themselves...to the breaking of **bread**”* and so must **we**. Even **Uncle Al and Norman Rockwell couldn't imagine a better “**dinner!**”**

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