

Surprise The World

Week 3 ~ Chapter 4: Eat

Back in the fall of 2021, you may recall, we at Castleton UMC did a little “rebranding”. We changed from having “Sunday School classes” and “small groups” to what we now call Table Groups. This chapter, at least in part, speaks to the reason/rationale behind that change. Admittedly, I believe only 3 of our current groups actually eat/drink together as part of their normal rhythm (we’re still a work in progress)...but the actual eating is less important than what the Table symbolizes historically, Biblically, and theologically.

Harkening back to our Sermon on the Mount study for a moment—Matthew 7:7-12, precisely—the point was made that the 3 great symbols of the Christian faith are the Cross, the Empty Tomb, and the Table. That coincides nicely with the point the Frost makes that Jesus came...

- “...to seek and save the lost.” (Luke 19:10)
- “...not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

(We might call these the What and the Why of His ministry.)

- “...eating and drinking.” (Luke 7:34)

(We can think of this as the How of His ministry.)

As followers of Jesus we are called/invited to follow His example. He fulfilled the mission by sharing a table with people—a whole variety of people. Isn’t it interesting that the way we participate in and contribute to the mission is by doing something (eating) that we naturally do—we actually NEED to do—anyway? We simply need to be more thoughtful and intentional about it. Friends, I think we can do this.

On a personal note, the reason I resonate with this chapter so much is because when I was in elementary school I was introduced to Jesus in someone’s home. Later, as a teenager/young adult, I was discipled largely in the context of someone’s home...and many, many meals. Most of my experience in ministry for the past 30 years has been done in the context of my home or other people’s homes, with meals being a key component of our gatherings. (Actually, CUMC is the only stop on my journey where homes are not a primary context for ministry. Again, we’re a work in progress.)

The reason homes and tables are such a central context of ministry is because this is where familial relationships are forged. In the New Testament, the two terms that are far and away the most commonly used terms to refer to Christians/believers are “disciples” (“mathetes” in Greek) and “brothers/sisters” (“adelphos” in Greek). Disciples refers to our relationship to Jesus; brothers/sisters refers to our relationship with one another. It cannot be overemphasized

how strenuously the New Testament underscores the fact that in Christ we are Family. Or said another way, what God is up to in the world is creating a new family in Jesus. With that in mind, it makes perfect sense that homes and tables are primary components for mission and ministry, because they are the primary components of families.

Furthermore, since the Jesus movement was/is designed to be a worldwide movement, we see the genius of the way of Jesus in utilizing homes, tables, and meals as these are essential in all people groups across time, place, and culture. (Notice also that you don't need to be "credentialed" to do ministry in a home around a table/meal. Credentialing is more of an institutional feature...and the Church is NOT primarily an institution.)

This chapter emphasizes that eating together is a theological practice. My favorite icon is *The Trinity* by Andrei Rublev dating back to the fifteenth century. Notice the Three Persons of the Trinity are at a table. Notice also that there's an open space at the table (the side of the table closest to the viewer). Legend has it that originally that little rectangle on the side of the table was actually where a little mirror was set so that the viewer saw themselves at the table with the Trinity. Theologically, this is a good way to understand the Church (again, not so much the institution but the worldwide family across time and place) as an extension of the Trinity.



From the get-go sharing meals together was a common practice and centerpiece of the church. We read in Acts 2:42 that the early church “...devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Contextually, “breaking of bread” is more accurately understood as generally sharing meals together, with the Lord's Supper/Eucharist being incorporated into that meal, as opposed to simply partaking of the Lord's Supper/Eucharist during a “worship” gathering.

Just a few verses later we read, “*Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*” (Acts 2:46-47, emphasis added) Notice that they didn’t meet weekly for a programmed worship service (like institutions do). Rather, they met daily (like families do). In doing so, they were Becoming a new family/people group. It was their life together that was drawing people in, creating the interest, intrigue, curiosity that assumedly led to people asking questions about them.

This book came out in 2016. While loneliness and isolation were on the rise then, it hadn’t quite hit the epidemic proportions that we’re seeing today. It seems to me that this particular habit, eating with others regularly, is an answer...maybe even a cure...to this grave social ill. And we, the Church/followers of Jesus, are uniquely designed to meet this head on.

One particular statement Frost made really stuck out: “*The table is the great equalizer in relationships.*” He then goes on for a few pages to explain Paul’s instructions (or perhaps more accurately, Paul’s chiding) to the Corinthian church. The Church gathered, centered around a table and shared meal, has always meant to be a glimpse of heaven...where a diverse group of people (rich and poor, young and old, various races and ethnicities, etc.) come together to celebrate their oneness in Christ...to celebrate that they are Family because of Jesus.

Frost’s comments on I Corinthians 11 are instructive and corrective. How so? Well, let me ask you: when we celebrate Holy Communion during a worship service, what do you tend to focus on (or what have you been taught that you’re supposed to focus on)? The tendency is to focus on confessing private, personal sins, and maybe some broad, general prayers of blessing for the congregation and the world at large. But, the focus ought to be, according to Paul, the oneness we have in Christ that came at great cost to Him. With that in mind, Holy Communion really ought to be the most interactive time of the service, as well as examining our hearts to see if we’re holding on to any anger, resentment, or bitterness toward a brother or sister, or if we’re distancing ourselves from a brother or sister, or as Frost suggests, if we’re excluding anyone from fellowship.

The second century church father Justin Martyr said, speaking of the Church, “*We who formerly hated and murdered one another...now live together and share the same table.*” Author, speaker, and podcaster Skye Jethani, says, “[*For the early Christians*] faith in Jesus Christ was not an individual, privatized devotion. It manifested itself boldly in the social and public square. It fundamentally changed the way people saw, and embraced, one another...Rather than reflecting the divisions of society, the church is called to reflect the unity of God’s kingdom.” This is best seen around a table.

We recently wrapped up our “Good Politics” series. Politics, at its core, is about how we order our lives together. Sharing a table/meal is perhaps the most basic political act because it’s a statement about who we include, and by extension, who we exclude. Thinking again of all the various people Jesus shared a table/meal with, it’s important to note that He often ate with His opponents (Pharisees). All that to say, let’s not hesitate to share a table/meal/coffee with

someone, say, of a different political persuasion. Fostering relationships, which sharing a table/meal lends itself to, can help us grow in empathy and understanding.

In a world marred with division, discord, disharmony, and distrust perhaps the most Surprising thing we can do is invite someone to share a table/meal with us. Eating is such an intrinsically human activity, that when we do it with others we are reminded of our shared humanity. Time at the table together allows us to explore and deepen our shared humanity.

People were shocked, sometimes even scandalized, by who Jesus shared a table/meal with. As His followers let's continue that tradition of Surprising the World by who we eat with. And may this not be a one-off project/activity that we do just do because we happen to be in a series that's highlighting it. Rather, let's make this a habit.

Possible Discussion Questions

- *Growing up, what was mealtime like in your home/family? What are mealtimes like in your home/family currently? If you're an empty-nester, what were mealtimes like while raising children?*
- *Who do you currently eat with on a regular basis? Can you think of anyone you might be able to invite into that time?*
- *Who are some people you'd like to spend some time with and get to know? (Both inside and outside the church.) Who might you be hesitant/resistant to meet with?*
- *When was the last time you had someone over for a meal that wasn't a family member or established relationship? When was the last time you were invited to someone's home for a meal that wasn't a family member or established relationship?*
- *Would you be more comfortable hosting someone in your home for a meal or eating out somewhere? Explain.*
- *Do you feel drawn toward, or resistant to, sharing a meal with someone in your home? Explain.*
- *Who is someone you can identify as lonely and isolated? How might you draw close to them, befriend them, ease their loneliness?*
- *There are numerous quotes sprinkled throughout this chapter. Which of them, if any, stood out to you, and why?*
- *What do you tend to think about or focus on during Communion?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Eat with Three People (and keep blessing three people)

It's important to remember that in this series we are trying to establish some habits. So, that means that we're not done with last week's habit of blessing others. We're going to continue doing that—bless 3 people...one in the church, one outside the church, and your choice with the third.

This week we're going to add to that eating with 3 people...similarly, one from the church, one not from church, and then your choice with the third.

This can be done in a variety of ways. The simplest might be to just meet for coffee...out or at home. Or, you can share a meal...again, out or at home. Maybe even pack a lunch and meet at a park or picnic bench.

If you find yourself feeling resistance to having someone in your home, that might be worth exploring, perhaps do a little introspection and pray about that...maybe talk about it with a trusted friend.

The goal of this exercise (that hopefully becomes a habit) is to experience human-to-human interaction, to get to know someone and allow them to know you.

Lastly, as a reminder, as we seek to cultivate habits through this series, it's very important that we do not become legalistic about them. Likewise, it's important to remember that we're not scoring any merit points from God by doing them either. Practices, exercises, even habits are simply a means of being formed/shaped into a particular type of person/people. They are HOW we BECOME the people we're called to be. But God doesn't love us any more by doing them, or less by not doing them...we are already BELOVED. (Never forget that!)