

“Dining With the Divine?”

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The Rev. Peter Faass

You have to love a Savior who not only loves to eat, but loves to feed people. I'm sure that somewhere in that concept is the theme for a new Food Network program. Maybe we could title it Savior Chef?" or "Meals with the Messiah?" or "Dining with the Divine?" Oh, the possibilities are endless. Look out, Emeril Lagasse.

Certainly the scriptures frequently speak of Jesus' love for breaking bread with people and his radical table fellowship. Those who opposed his ministry and message even once condemned these practices, disparagingly speaking of Jesus' fondness for food and drink and his enjoying doing so with the perceived riff raff of society.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells the crowds, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and [the Pharisees] say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' (Mt. 11:19)

Jesus knew, as do we Episcopalians, the importance of eating for both pleasure and nourishment in our daily life. It is no secret that this congregation loves to eat, certainly for nourishment, but especially for pleasure and celebration. One can witness this truth in our frequent receptions, picnics, barbeques, coffee hours, and suppers. This weekend also marks the first anniversary of our Community Meal. This ministry is a powerful manifestation of how we take seriously the example of Jesus to feed people and to dine with them, especially those who might be considered on the margins of our society.

The image of feeding is a strong one in today's Gospel. After the disciples experience a frustrating night of unsuccessful fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus appears standing on the beach with breakfast ready for them. We are told that, "[the disciples] saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread." This may in fact be the inaugural of what we know as the clambake.

It is notable that when the resurrected Jesus first appears on the shore to the fishing disciples he refers to them with the affectionate term children. "Children," he says, "you have no fish, have you? They answered him, 'No.'" (Mt.21:5) Then Jesus does in his resurrected life what he did during his earthly ministry; he feeds his children, tending the flock given into his care. Think of a hybridized Italian/Jewish mother, and you have some idea of Jesus and his passion for taking care of people by feeding them.

When breakfast was over, Jesus commissions the disciples to do the same as he has done; feed people. What he really does is re-state the new commandment given a few days earlier on Maundy Thursday: "Love one another as I have loved you."

After all are fed, Jesus tells the disciples through Peter that their ministry is to feed others. Jesus asks, and Peter replies three times to the question of whether Peter loves Jesus. Each time Peter responds affirmatively to which Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep." For Peter and for all disciples including us, living the resurrected life means to tend to those entrusted to our care by Jesus; those who are vulnerable and in need of protection: God's children.

This final record of Jesus' feeding and tending to his children becomes the object lesson of the Good News: Feeding, tending, nurturing, and protecting children - both the literal child and those who for one reason or another are vulnerable like children - is one of the highest callings of the Christian Church, her leaders and of all Christians.

To not have the protection of children as the highest objective of our Christian life is to fail to inculcate the essence of Jesus' message into the fabric of our faith. Christians who believe otherwise - who believe that the protection of children is not one of our highest priorities - but rather that self-preservation, self-promotion or personal or institutional needs trump this Gospel imperative, have gone far astray from Jesus Christ. They are seriously misguided and deluded.

As Jesus says in Luke, "it would be better for you if a milestone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the

sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.” (Lk. 12:2) Causing little ones to stumble- harming the most vulnerable given into our care - is a serious offense in Jesus’ eyes. And protecting those who do so only compounds the seriousness of the offense. Christians need to take these words of Jesus seriously.

Now I know this sermon is evoking images of the on-going pedophilia crisis in the Roman Catholic Church and the appalling manner in which the clerical hierarchy – from parochial priests to the pope himself - have responded to this crisis. Certainly the protection of children, and all little ones, did not register very high in the Church’s response to this cancerous child abuse and its subsequent cover-up. That is all inexcusable.

But this sermon aims beyond the current circumstances of that denomination, as awful as they are. It goes to all those in authority in the Church who have abused the little ones in their care. It aims at all who have used their position and authority to manipulate and abuse the vulnerable. It aims at all those who have engaged in authority abuse and harmed one of the flock, one of the lambs, one of the children:

- Priests who ensnare and abuse children, and pastors who lure people in their pastoral care into sexual relationships.
- Televangelists who preach purity of life, but have sex with female or male prostitutes.
- Ministers who abuse the flock by preaching salvation in return for donations and who then embezzle those funds meant for building God’s Kingdom.
- Glitzy showmen who convince their flock that their extravagant life styles, funded by contributions from the elderly and poor, are somehow ordained by God.
- Nuns who have terrorized children in their care through the use corporeal punishment, rather than give compassion and care.
- Clergy and lay employees whose avarice for the high-life has left churches financially ruined.
- The hypocrisy of all Christians – lay and ordained – who speak one thing and do another.

Ultimately all this authority abuse is a manifestation of man made religion; it is not of God. And it knows no race, creed, gender, color or denomination.

Authority abuse is a sin. It is the perversion of something beautiful into something evil. And like all sin, it stands as an obstacle between God and humanity. The end result of this sin is that we have countless people who have been hurt, some seriously damaged, by the church, her leaders and institutional religion. This is absurd to say the least because the Church’s primary directive from Jesus is to feed, love and protect.

What this authority abuse has left in its wake are legions of people who seek God and desire to be in relationship with God, but who have no use for and even fear and loath organized religion. It is a profoundly heart-breaking situation.

We can change that paradigm. We can mend our broken hearts. We can let those damaged people who fear institutional religion know that there is a place where they will be feed and tended too. We can restore their faith. This will not be a quick change, but we can do it. In fact if we take our faith seriously we must change this paradigm. Otherwise we fail Jesus in his commission to us.

In a few moments, we will baptize Alexander Emerson Cates. He is the newest child being entrusted into the care of the church, the Body of Christ. Alexander’s parents and godparents will be making vows on his behalf including helping him to grow into the full stature of Christ. They will also renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. We will then commit to supporting them and young Alexander with all in our power to uphold these vows.

And we help them uphold these vows with love, which of course is what Jesus has been telling us to do all along:

- We will love by holding one another accountable and being open and transparent in all we do.
- We will love by speaking the truth in love to those Christians who have gone far astray from Jesus' command.

- We will love by providing the safest, healthiest environment we can possibly offer for all of God's children.
- We will love by giving infinite respect and radical hospitality to all in our community and to all we serve in mission and ministry.

In doing these things we will be heeding Jesus command to feed, tend, nurture and protect all who are given into our care.

There is no way to change the current paradigm and bring about our healing other than through love. The truth be told there is no other way to live but to love and to be loved, as Christ loved us.

Amen