

“The Feast!”

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John 6:30-35

I'm going to share a story today that is not specifically from this congregation's past, however a theme from the story connects to our present, our past and certainly our future. We are talking about food, more specifically, we are talking about a feast.

When we talk about a feast we are talking about great food with amplified meaning in the context of family or community. Imagine the kind of food you most enjoy. This almost always comes along with other people with whom you eat that food. Certainly we can eat food by ourselves, but it is an altogether different experience to eat among others.

It is not uncommon to hear people around here say that food and celebrating with food is part of what it means to be Baptist. We have snackage after worship each Sunday, and eat during many of our congregation meetings.

The builders of this church building also felt strongly about eating together. They intentionally built a Banquet Hall below this sanctuary

because they anticipated having lots of meals where people gather and share their lives together.

There is something about eating together that both nourishes the body, the soul, and also nourishes our sense of community.

Recently, we have been reorganizing how we share in meals together. Last year, we added some new people into our meal preparation team, creating a new flair to our congregation meals with different kinds of food, different presentation of that food including decorations, and meal themes.

Going back to the end of January, we had a chili cook off with hot chocolate bar and streaming fabric swooping from the ceiling. Last November during our Vision Celebration Dinner we had a unique dessert table from local bakeries and floating Japanese lanterns transforming the space.

This will also be the case for Saturday, April 25 when we celebrate the 150th anniversary of this church congregation. Expect that the food will delight and the environment will add to our celebration.

Our meals are distinct times to celebrate our past, our current life

together, and also function to point us into a hopeful future.

I want to tell you a story from another community about the power of celebrating with food — this is from Brightmoor on the west side of Detroit.

Riet Schumack moved into a house on Bramell Street in the very poor and dicey neighborhood of Brightmoor nearly 20 years ago. There were houses down the street visible in either direction from Riet's home that were abandoned and rotated with squatters conducting drug deals or using the buildings for prostitution.

She didn't move there because she had to. Riet moved there because it was a rough and very poor community. In fact, she moved there to be a missionary of hope.

One of the first things Riet did in the neighborhood was take plates of cookies around to her neighbors because she felt that is what people do in good neighborhoods.

But when she knocked on doors, many people didn't answer, when she knew they were home. Others opened their doors just a crack with the chain still bolted on the inside with suspicious looks on their faces.

That first year, Riet handed a number of plates of cookies sideways around chains through the cracks in doorways. That was the degree of trust that existed in the community. Their sense of neighborliness was ruled by fear.

Riet was there to offer a different way to be a community. She lived among them demonstrating kindness, simple neighborliness, and hope that growing a sense of ownership in the community was possible ... through food!

During her first summer, Riet went right to work to develop the first community garden in Brightmoor. She got to know parents but dedicated a generous amount of time mentoring children who were open in a different way than their parents. These children became caretakers of the gardens she began creating in empty lots throughout the neighborhood.

Riet got the kids together to name the gardens and paint bright signs of butterflies, sunshine, and flowers that they could stake in their gardens as symbols of community pride.

Riet was firm that they needed to commit to care for these gardens with planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting. She found the kids were motivated when they realized

that they could both take home vegetables they grew, and take home money they received by selling the produce.

Pride in the community began to deepen through food.

Riet felt that there was a need for the whole community to celebrate in a bigger way, again around food. So she created an annual Harvest Festival for the whole Brightmoor community where they could celebrate together in the harvest with a great feast from produce they grew. Later they added other fun activities for families to celebrate their community.

In addition to the grand feast around the table, last October, their Harvest Festival included pumpkin painting, hay rides, a bounce house, an obstacle course, and donuts with freshly-pressed cider. They even had a band come to play for their party in the neighborhood park.

The feast never would have happened if Riet didn't begin with an intention to grow community by carrying plates of cookies to her neighbors and invited the kids to plant some seeds.

Perhaps the annual harvest feast in Brightmoor reflects the great feast talked about in scripture — the

feast, hosted by Jesus, the Messiah, bringing together all people from every race, country, sexual orientation, and culture to celebrate the rich goodness and provision of a loving God — this feast is the demonstration of what is possible for humanity when people find a home in God's family.

There is a long history among Jews of this feast dating back hundreds of years before Jesus, but we also find it in many New Testament writings as well.

There is a story about Jesus in chapter six of the book of John that I'll read for you. The whole chapter centers around food, and this is not random or a coincidence.

The chapter begins with Jesus feeding 5,000 people on a mountainside out of the lunch bag a young boy brought that contained only five small barley biscuits and two fish.

Some say that the miracle of this meal perhaps was not that these loaves and fish magically were multiplied, but perhaps the miracle was in the crowd of people who saw the generosity of an innocent child, and were prompted to think about the greater community, so they also shared what they had,

such that a feast was possible in overflowing abundance.

This reading is the miracle of abundance found in community.

After the miracle of that meal, people pursued Jesus across the Sea because they were amazed by Jesus and wanted more.

A group of these people confront Jesus and he tells them that the food God provides will fill them unlike any typical loaves and fish. In fact, the food that God provides can nourish people so that their souls will be satisfied for all time.

Only God can provide such a feast with such life-giving power!

The people question Jesus further. Listen to their conversation.

READ JOHN 6:30-35

Truly, Jesus is giving them a refrain from the song we sang earlier, “the feast is ready to begin” and they are invited!

But the people seem to have missed the point of the feast on the mountainside. When they come asking him for more miracles, more signs, more dramatics, he all but rebukes them.

The feeding of the 5,000 was not simply a show of power and dramatics, signs and wonders, but was to point them to real food.

When we celebrate meals together with food around tables, we are reminded that God provides through nature the food that nourishes our bodies — but there is so much more. This food points us to another gift from God, Jesus himself and the blessing of our inclusion in God’s family.

We are reminded that our bodies hunger for food just like our soul hungers for purpose and meaning. This hunger is met when God calls us together in Jesus around the common table.

When we eat together, we are reminded that God gives us spiritual nourishment that keeps alive our faith and hope. In part, this nourishment is found in the relationships in a community that has become a family filled with purpose in the world.

And in part this nourishment is found when we open ourselves to a relationship with Jesus and allow God’s Spirit to transform our lives from the inside out.

May we all pray continually as those did in Luke, “Sir, give us this bread always.”