Sermon- Come Let Us Eat

Scripture: Luke 5: 27-32 Sunday, July 16, 2017

As you know we are working through a 5 part sermon series that corresponds to the BLESS movement that is taking shape across Kansas City. BLESS is an acronym that stands for …. BLESS was put together with the recognition that these 5 elements encompass all the important ingredients in being God’s agents in the neighborhood we are placed in. Today we are in the E that stands for “eating together”.

When you look at Jesus’ ministry, his religious colleagues were as shocked at the parties that Jesus attended as they were of the miracles he performed. They were shocked because of who he chose to dine with, they were shocked at what he himself chose to eat and drink and they were shocked at how often he did it. Well, when it comes to everything Jesus did, there was always a profound reason. Now, Jesus was not a frequent party goer because he was a hedonistic alcoholic. He went to parties because that was one component of his world transforming mission. To connect with people who would not have naturally been in his circles. And if that was a critical component of Jesus’ strategy it needs to be ours too. So lets examine it carefully.

First, let’s get a broad scope of the meals that Jesus was involved in. In the Gospel of Luke, you will find that almost every story was around meals. Jesus was either at a meal or going to his meal or returning from one. And if you where to look at the four Gospels broadly you will find that Jesus starts his ministry at a wedding feast and just before he dies he celebrates his last meal with his disciples. Then he institutes the last meal he had with his disciples as the central pillars of the future church community he was building. Then after His resurrection he takes a long walk with his disciples from Jerusalem to Emmaus, but it is only when they eat together at dinner time that they actually recognize who He was. In fact almost every post resurrection encounter that Jesus has with his disciples are meal related events. And that is not where the meal images stop as you know. You can turn the dial of time all the way to the end to the second coming of our Lord and what is the event at which you and I will get to meet our Savior in person. Well it is going to be at the wedding feast of the Lamb. That will be no doubt the grandest meal of all. So when you look at where Jesus’ ministry and meals intersect, you will find that the intersection points where not just occasional coincidences. So much so that Jesus makes a comment about himself in Matt 11:6, his own self-description is, “the son of Man comes eating and drinking”.

So the question you might be asking is why does Jesus do so much around meals? Well, I think there are a few reasons for this. At the ground level, eating and drinking is one of the most basic of human needs. Hunger and thirst cross every kind of barrier that exists in the world. Now people eat very different foods. Americans enjoy their half raw steaks and Japanese enjoy their completely raw sea food. (I must say though that while it sounds gross when you think of eating fish raw, the quality of the sea food used in sushi is so high that it does not taste raw at all. Point being Japanese sushi lovers are not that different from us). The Africans might relish their fried grasshoppers but the textures that they are biting into are not that different from eating a crunch snack. But no matter what kinds of foods you might enjoy, the feeling of hunger and thirst is what it means to be human. But there is something else. If you were blind folded and dropped into a country whose name you have not heard about and the people spoke a language you could not recognize, you may nothing about the customs of that country but you can be sure about this, that the people in that country would gather around food.

People in every culture not only eat to satisfy their hunger but use food as a way of socializing. It seems people don’t just hunger for food, but people hunger to eat with other people. Think about this, do you know of any restaurant where you can find a table for one person? I have never seen any and this country is the most individualistic country in the world. Even in this country if you wanted to spend time with someone you would ask, “do you want to grab some coffee, right?” Now as you move Eastward on the globe you find that eating becomes more and more social to the point where in China all the restaurants have round tables that seat large numbers of people and almost every restaurant table has a place where the food is cooked right in that table. Which means that all the people eating together can share even more time together as the food is cooked and each person participates in the cooking process. Then when you go to some cultures in countries like Ethiopia and even the middle East people share a single plate to eat from and they eat from a common pile of rice or one single large bread that everyone tears into. People all over the world not only need food to survive but also use food to connect with other people.

So why is eating together to important for people universally? Well, every time we eat together we are reminding each other of **how similar we are**. Even if you order different things in a restaurant, we are sub consciously communicating to each other that we have the same needs, we both need food to live and there are similarities in what we like even if we come from different backgrounds. You see when we notice that someone else is a little bit like us, it tells us we are not alone. It feels good. But there is more. When we eat together, especially in a home, do you realize that how much we eat depends on how much food is there and the needs of the people around us. If there is less of something we might make sure other people have before we take something or if there is one dish that no one is taking, we might actually eat more of that than we would otherwise have just to balance the food available for everyone. And usually no matter how little there is, no one takes the last piece right? You know why, that’s because in almost every culture, it is a message that there was enough to go around. So when we eat together because of all these small gestures that we do automatically, we care for each other. **And we feel cared for**.

And there is one more thing. If we are willing to eat what we are offering to someone else, it also means that the food is safe to eat. So if I take food that you offer me, it also means **I trust you** and if you eat what I offer you, it means that you trust me. So eating together reminds us that we are not alone, we have people who care for us and there are people who we trust and who trust us.

So when we eat together, we establish common humanity, we feel cared for and we establish trust. A few years ago I had a ministry to the Bhutanese Nepali refuge community in Pittsburgh. The key component of that ministry was the meals that I ate at their homes. Every time you went to their home they feed you a meal. And it did not matter what time you went too. And even if you went in the morning the meal they fed you was a full meal that would be dinner. They really did not distinguish between breakfast, lunch and dinner. In fact they themselves may actually eat only one full meal a day but they made sure that if you went to their house that you were fed well. And it was not just that you had to be prepared to eat in their home, if you did not eat in their home it would be treated as a sign of disrespect but it also showed how close you were to them. If you drank tea in their house, that was really the start of a friendship, but if you had a meal now that meant you were like family. And you could establish that bond, simply by eating with them.

But as much as human beings like to eat with other people, it does not mean that people are comfortable eating with just about anybody. In every society in the world there are all kinds of unwritten rules that people follow about who they can and cannot eat with. In many cultures, there are caste and class considerations. In India it used to be that the people of one caste would never eat in the home of a different caste. Although a lower caste person was allowed to send food home though to the upper caste person. Of course, when you factor in wealth differences and religious differences, now you are talking about different food habits that become barriers to really having a meal with people who are different than you. In Jesus’ time, there were communities of people that the Jews hated- the Samaritans, the tax collectors and people who became outcasts in society because of sins they may have committed. What Jesus did during his ministry was to systematically sit down for meals with every category of people that the Jews considered outcasts. People who the average Jew would never it down for a meal with. And every time he ate with someone different he was creating a new community right there. And if you followed Jesus through those three years of his ministry, and followed all the meals he ate, you would see that it was almost like he was creating a new kind of community that never existed before. A community where there was no distinction between rich and poor, high class or low class, no distinction based on education levels or even spiritual cleanness. Not even gender.

Now as amazing as it was to create such a community of all kinds of people without barriers, the community that Jesus was creating on earth was only the effect of a much more fundamental barrier that Jesus was breaking. The barrier between God and human beings. If that barrier had not been broken, then no other barrier could have been broken. Because left to ourselves, even though human beings were built for community, because we are fallen creatures, any of us are fully capable of turning against or own brothers and sisters given the right circumstances. And that is why the true community is only possible when Christ sits at the head of the table.

And Christ does not just sit at the head of the table as Lord, but to communicate to us that, even between Christ and ourselves we share a common humanity, that even between God and us, God cares for us personally and we should reciprocate as well and at the table with God, He trusts us and He trust Him. And all that put together means that we are family with Christ Himself.

Now the question is this, if Jesus’ ministry was in fact so deeply integrated with meals that if we are to follow in his footsteps then what is our food strategy when it comes to reaching our neighbors. If the church founded by Jesus Christ is this incredible instrument of reconciliation, bring people together, what if people from the church could do what Christ did, going out into the neighborhood finding the people who are excluded and dine with them. What if the people in our church were in tune with where the dividing lines were in the neighborhoods around us, and then deliberately created our own community by dining with people on both sides of the divide. Are there groups of people who will eat with you who will refuse to eat with each other for example that you know off? Are there people in the neighborhoods who would never get a dinner invitation if we did not invite them? The International Student ministry is the example that I know where this kind of community is created. When International Students first come into this country, they are outsiders who exist on the periphery of American society. They would never get to see the inside of an American home, even if they lived here for 5 years unless someone from the church realized that they were there and opened their home and heart to them. But when you do, something really amazing happens. You create a new community which would never exist otherwise. In our ministry we have Japanese and Chinese sitting and eating together. We have Indians and Pakistanis who will happily share a meal if we invite them, we have Saudi’s eating with Qatari’s and Russians eating with Ukrainians. And they will be eating with us. Why because Christ is sitting at the head of the table.

The question is, can Argentine Mennonite Church create this kind of community in this neighborhood. Who could you invite to your home? And what about doing it the other way? Could we try to do it the other way round? Could we tell some people in our neighborhood that we would like to come over, and eat with them? Could we invite ourselves into the homes of our lunch buddies and Venture club kids? Now if we can actually make that transition then I believe will have gone to the next level in our relationship with this neighborhood. If Jesus used food to reach the people he needed to reach then why not us. What if our church used food to cross lines in our neighborhood? Think about this. Let us pray.