

## Sermon for October 7, 2018 – “Extending the Table”

World Communion Sunday – Texts: Lamentations 3:17-26; Psalm 34:1-18

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A few years ago, I came across a remarkable book, filled with amazing photographs. This book: *Hungry Planet: What the World Eats*. About 13 years ago, Peter Menzel and Faith D’Aluisio set out to travel the globe to investigate what people eat. Typical people, normal relative to their own locations and cultures. So, they sat down with 30 families from 24 countries and they talked together about their lives and their work, their favorite recipes, and how they got their food. Did they shop at a place like Whole Foods or from street vendors? Did they farm and grow/raise their food sources? Did they barter with others nearby? Then the authors photographed each family with one week’s worth of the food they consume. One family from California spends \$159/week for their food while a family from North Carolina spends \$341. A family from Germany spends \$445 Euros each week which is about \$500 US while a family from Darfur in a refugee camp in Chad spends 685 Francs which is about \$1.23.

There’s something remarkable about these photos; seeing all those Coke bottles lined up behind the Mexican family, all the gorgeous detailed embroidery on the clothing of the Guatemalan mother whose family dines each week for 573 Quetzales which is about \$75. The variety of food consumed is really incredible, often things here in the US that we’d never dream of eating. In China, for example, they eat deep-fried scorpions-on-a-stick because it’s good for one’s complexion. In fact, there’s a saying in China that says, “the Chinese will eat anything with four legs except a table and anything with two wings except an airplane.”

**How** we eat, **What** we eat is a common thread that binds us together as well as something that sets us apart from one another. Here are some of the favorite foods that were shared with the authors of the book. The family from Great Britain loves cheese and potato pie. The Mongolian family treasures their recipe for mutton dumplings. The Ecuadorian family shared a recipe for barley porridge. The Polish family treated their guests to pig’s knuckles with pimento berries which they call Hubert’s Knuckle, while a family in Greenland swears by their recipe for seal stew! The book shows how the familiar and the exotic overlap in unexpected ways. The family from Beijing China loves shredded pork with sweet and sour sauce and the family from Mexico loves pizza, pasta and chicken. The family from the Philippines loves both traditional “adidas” that is, chicken feet (not athletic shoes, though that’s where the name comes from) and – believe it or not – Cheez Whiz. They eat it for breakfast.

The authors of *Hungry Planet* wanted to show us how new and exotic foods are not only showing up in great abundance on our own supermarket shelves, but KFC, Coca-Cola and Kraft processed cheese singles are also showing up on grocery shelves from Bosnia to Bahrain. It’s a hungry planet, certainly, but it’s a small planet and getting smaller as our cultures reach out and touch one another. It’s challenging to think about what we eat and to put it in the perspective of globalization and starvation and the epidemics of obesity and diabetes (diabesity, as one author put it) in our own country. But, as another author has expressed it “There’s a hunger **beyond** food that’s expressed **in** food and that’s why feeding is always a kind of miracle.” So, when we eat together we bring together the fragments of our lives and become a community. We move from being separate to being one.

Each year on the first Sunday in October we observe World Communion Sunday, a day centered around the idea of sharing a meal together. It started in 1933 at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh one of the darkest years of the Great Depression, a time when Nazism was on the rise in Europe. The good people of Shadyside felt a celebration, one that emphasized Christian unity, would provide encouragement and solace, not to mention, a sense that the Church was still relevant. More than anything it was an attempt to show that the Church was still able to speak a word of hope to a world that was feeling increasingly hopeless. And so, their plan was to emphasize unity through the sharing of a common meal, the communion meal, the sacrament of the Lord's Table. A meal that breaks down walls between both churches **and** individuals. So, indeed, there's a hunger in each of us. A hunger **beyond** food, something that makes eating together a kind of miracle. I think it's because when we eat together we bring together the fragments of our individual lives and experience communion where we move from being **separate** to being **one**. In this morning's passage from Jeremiah's Lamentations we hear echoes of fear, insecurity and the kind of persecution that was on the rise in 1933 not unlike that which is on the rise in our own day. The plaintive cry goes up: **"The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me."** And yet, immediately the passage offers a reminder, **"But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion,"** says my soul, **therefore, I will hope in Him."** I love that – **"The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will hope in Him!"** When we're in the depths of fear or despair nothing tastes very good. Everything is bitter and feels that such will always be the case. But, when we rest in the blessed reassurance of the God of abundance being our portion, life is filled with flavor again. Things taste sweeter. The simplest things fill us. We know we are cared for.

As our second reading from Psalm 34 reminds us, we have sought the Lord and He answered us and delivered us from all my fears. That our poor souls have cried and were heard by the Lord and were saved from every trouble. We have indeed tasted and seen that the Lord **is** good, that happy are those who take refuge in Him, that those who fear Him have no want, that those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. We know encouragement on dark days. We know the solace of the embrace of God. Still, our call as people of faith goes beyond reassuring ourselves, beyond simply seeking solace and encouragement. It goes to caring for others, extending the table, lengthening it as we often do on holidays when we gather for large family meals. So, does it occur to you as it does to me that rather than asking what the church can do for us we ought to be asking how we can serve others? Okay, so let me ask...How can we serve others? How can we extend the table? The answer to that question is as varied as human personalities. We serve others in countless ways, but for Christians table service is the first and foremost and the one Jesus modeled for us most often. As Luke's gospel reminds us: We are God's servants. The question is have we done our duty? As I said earlier, there's hunger **beyond** food, a hunger that's expressed **in** food and that's why feeding is always a kind of miracle. When we eat together we experience communion. We move from being separate to being one.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, we recognize a truth we often take for granted. The truth that the table around which we gather is larger than we might imagine. The table extends to those here in Westwood, all across Cincinnati, across the country, all over the world. It also extends to those in our congregation who are homebound and to whom we will bring home communion. The world is too small for us to imagine that they – or anyone – are **not** our neighbors. On this World Communion Sunday as we gather around Christ's table remembering His command to love and serve our neighbors, answering His call to extend that table to those who with a hunger **beyond** food, a hunger expressed in the simple elements of bread and cup, a meal that is nothing short of miraculous.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.