

Today we start our Lenten sermon series. I hope you brought a bib! We are going to be walking with Jesus during this next 6 weeks and taking a closer look at his dining experiences. We're calling this series, "Meeting Jesus at the Table". It is based on a book by Cynthia Campbell. Each week we will look at a story of Jesus in a dining experience and tie it to ways in which we can deepen our individual and communal approaches to faith.

Since we're talking about dining, it seems fitting to talk about people who find every way possible to use food as a sacred part of their everyday lives. I'm talking about United Methodist people.

Let me explain more. First, did you know that some people make of us United Methodists? They call us bland, they say we're excessively calm, we're always afraid of giving offense. We clearly lack speed on anything and we have a secret fondness for macaroni and cheese.

Here are some other things about us United Methodists you may not know. (Pay attention to all of the food related things)

If someone is dying, we will comfort them | If someone is lonely, we will talk to them. | And if someone is hungry, we will give them chicken salad. | We believe in prayer but will do anything to avoid being asked to pray out loud.

We like to sing, except when confronted with a new hymn or a hymn with more than four stanzas. | We follow the official liturgy as a way of suffering for our sins. | We believe in miracles and even expect them, especially during stewardship time and passing the plate. | We think that the Bible forbids us from crossing the aisle while passing the peace.

We drink coffee as if it were the Third Sacrament and we're willing to pay up to 1 dollar for a meal at the church. | We serve Jell-O in the proper liturgical color of the season and think that broccoli in a chicken casserole adds too much color. | When it's 120 degrees outside, we will still have coffee during fellowship hour. | Donuts are a line item in the church budget, as is coffee.

When we hear something funny during a sermon, we will smile as loudly as we can. | When we watch a Star Wars movie and they say, "May the Force be with you," we respond, "and also

with you." | Finally, it takes ten minutes for us to say good-bye! These is from Garrison Kellers article. "On Methodists".

Think about all the ways in which you heard food described here. Jello, chicken salad, donuts, and coffee. These aren't just suggested items they are required at any United Methodist church. I'd like to tell you that food is only important to United Methodists, but that just isn't the case. Food is a glue across all peoples and all cultures.

Antoni Porowski, culinary voice of the show Queer Eye had this to say about meals. Sharing meals together is a powerful way to connect with others, viewing food as a language of love that can convey deep emotions, connect people to their roots, and serve as a way to say "I love you" or "I'm sorry."

Jesus seemed to agree wholeheartedly with this idea. Think about how many times he used food to say, "I love you." Some of the most significant events in Jesus' ministry occurred around a meal. During Jesus time food insecurity was just as much an issue as it is today, perhaps even more so.

Many people who lived in Galilee, Jesus' homeland, were one step away from hunger, one bad harvest, one season of warfare, one disaster or another. Just like today, in Jesus' time there were starving people. So why on earth would Jesus talk so much about food and meals. Was he that insensitive?

There are only 6 incidents in Jesus' life that are shared by all four gospel writers. Even his own birth didn't rank mention across all gospels. But today's event, the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness was one that caught the attention of every single gospel writer. And today we will look at Mark's account of this event.

We say Meeting Jesus at the Table, and yet this first event doesn't happen at a table at all. It takes place in the wilderness. They were Dining Alfresco. What an interesting choice this is. Why would Jesus choose this food related event to take place in the wilderness?

Perhaps it was meant to serve as a reminder to his Jewish audience about other wilderness experiences in which their ancestors were fed. Let's remind ourselves briefly of that story. Going all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, we find that Egypt was a common place for

those of Canaan to go during times of famine. This is how a few generations later, thanks to Joseph, all of Jacob's family ended up in Egypt.

Over time the Israelites became enslaved, and Moses was sent to lead them out of slavery. Their "exodus" sent them into the wilderness and in that wilderness, they had no food. What were they going to do? They were so hungry, no...they were starving. God saw their hunger and sent food to them. Quail appeared in the evening and in the morning white stuff appeared on the ground. That white stuff was...

For the Israelites, God provided Manna, bread from heaven. Bread in the wilderness. Food at the moment of the greatest insecurity. The bread of life.

This story would live on for the rest of time in the Hebrew Bible, recalled by the Psalmists and the prophets. It would be deeply embedded in Jesus and all who gathered in the wilderness this day.

As for the story itself, all gospel writers start it the same way. A large crowd is gathered to listen to Jesus. They love his teachings, his stories, and especially his gift for healing illnesses. But this went on for a very long time. It was getting towards the end of the day. Jesus recognized that they needed food for both soul and body.

His doubting disciples somehow manage to find 5 loaves and two fish. Jesus takes these and blesses them. Inconceivable, but this meager meal feeds the entire multitude. Over 5000 souls. And with leftovers. Twelve baskets to be exact. What is the coincidence here?

COVID taught us about hunger in many ways. It wasn't just about eating. Anyone can eat to sustain their life. But we're taught at an early age that food is meant to be shared. Meals bring people together and create relationships. COVID left us wanting here.

COVID was also about food insecurity. Remember how many people lined up to get food, including people in high end cars. Schools closed and for a while the free breakfasts and lunches were gone. It was more than hunger that was at play during this time. Anxiety and shame of individuals was intensified. I remember hearing more than one person say in television interviews say. "We used to be the people who bought extra food to take to food banks, and now here we are."

Churches were affected in many ways, the worst way being not to be able to meet in person. A poll was conducted with churchgoers during this time. The question that was asked was “what they missed most about in-person worship”. The Overwhelming response was...Communion. It turns out that eating that piece of bread and sipping that bit of juice at home isn't the same. Sure it's not a lot of food we consume here. But it is a real meal because we share it with one another in the presence of the one who said, “I am the bread of life.”

Friends, we are in the season of Lent. We have 36 days left. During this season, many followers of Jesus practice some sort of fasting. For thousands of years abstaining from food has been a way for many religions to focus attention on their gods. Fasting was used to signify the intention to return to God's ways and renew the promise to be God's covenant people.

There are some things that fasting is not. First, it is not a weight-loss program. Second, it is not a way to punish ourselves.

Also, fasting isn't exclusive to Christianity; it is practiced in many other religions. It is practiced in Judaism as a sign of repentance, especial on Yom Kippur which is their festival day of atonement. Muslims fast for a full 30 days during the festival of Ramadan, just during the day. This is going on even as we speak. Ramadan Kareem! For Muslims, fasting signifies spiritual renewal and recommitment.

That leaves us, Christians. What does fasting mean to a follower of Christ? It's how we practice self-denial. It's how we identify with Christ's suffering. It's a way to recognize our sin. It's a way to recognize our need for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Fasting can take on many forms. It can mean limiting or abstaining from certain foods like meat, dairy, chocolate. It could mean eating a simpler meal one day a week and contributing the savings to a local food ministry. Fasting may have nothing to do with food. It could mean limiting TV or social media. It can mean adding something, like reading more scripture, praying, or volunteering.

While yes, we are talking about dining at a table, today's example of Jesus dining in a wilderness setting, is a reminder of times throughout history when food has been scarce.

Today's story is a tangible way to remind ourselves that we do not live by bread alone. It is a

reminder that we cannot take food or water for granted. It is a reminder that in our time of need, God provides. In the wilderness Jesus provided bread, a symbol for what sustains life each and every day.

As we remember the wilderness experience and the manna God provided for the Israelites, we are all reminded of one other thing. The manna was a day-to-day thing. The Israelites were only allowed to gather food for one day at a time. That is a reminder for us that what is important is not so much what we are eating, but who provides it.

Church family we do not live only because of the food we eat. Our deeper nourishment comes from God, whose son The Word is bread. Jesus is food that keeps body and soul together. Whether dining inside a table or al fresco or outside. Jesus is and always will be our bread of life.