
How About Lunch?

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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 Psalm 79 1 Timothy 2:1-7 John 6:1-14

How about lunch? I have a friend from my high school days in Canada whose job brings him occasionally to London. Whenever it does the phone will ring and the voice will say, "Hi, it's Bob, how about lunch?" Invitations like that come to us all. Somebody we work with, somebody we have not seen in a while, somebody we've just met at a social gathering or somebody we've known for a lifetime says, "How about lunch?" Sometimes it is just the opportunity to get together, to catch up. Sometimes it is a chance to discuss something that really matters, some problem in the office, some personal struggle, some career opportunity. Sometimes it's a confession of sin, some minor peccadillo or some major social faux pas. Sometimes it's a profession of faith, in the person or in some shared project.

Now an invitation to breakfast usually means business. Not being a morning person I generally try to avoid breakfast meetings. An invitation to dinner usually means something formal or perhaps romantic. But an invitation to lunch is an invitation to share, to put your feet up or let your hair down, to set business aside and talk about life, about things that matter, about health matters, about the kids, about the chemotherapy treatments, about the grief process, about the job search, about the divorce, about retirement, about our faith. How about lunch? How about lunch?

That's what Jesus said to Zacchaeus and by the time lunch had ended the cup of Zacchaeus' soul was so full and overflowing that he doubled his pledge card to the local synagogue. How about lunch? Jesus meets a woman at Jacob's Well. It is lunchtime and he is waiting on his friends. Meanwhile he engages the woman in conversation and by the end of lunch she rushes off to tell her neighbours about her epiphany, her great discovery both about herself and about Jesus. How about lunch? Or the time he is teaching on the hillside, our gospel lesson for today, and people from nearby villages come to listen. After several hours he says to his disciples, "How about lunch?" and the disciples gulp in surprise and dismay. There are no coffee shops close by, no Tim Horton's or MacDonald's. A child offers up his lunch and the child's generosity opens the floodgates so that there is more than enough for everybody with lots left over. And so often isn't it the case, that it is child's offering that unlocks the door for the rest of us. I think of 4 year-old Alex Scott's Lemonade Stand for cancer or 7 year-old Ryan Hreljec's Ryan's Wells or 12 year-old Craig Kielberger's Free the Children. How about lunch?

Our gospel lesson this morning is what we have come to know as the feeding of the five thousand. On the surface it is another miracle story. Jesus is teaching the multitudes. It is lunch time and Jesus takes a little boy's lunch, five barley loaves and two fish, gives thanks and distributes so that everyone has more than enough. Nice little story. But this is John's gospel, remember. The ascent up the mountain, the gathered multitudes of hungry people, the proximity of the Passover, and the miraculous feeding all call to mind God's provision of manna in the wilderness placing Jesus and his teaching in line with Moses and his giving of the Law. The early church was very aware of drawing parallels between Moses and Jesus, between the "old Testament" and the "new Testament."

Note the verbs that the author uses, "take," "give thanks," and "distribute" referring to the words Jesus uses at the last supper, words still used in the Eucharist, as we multiply the loaves and fishes, as we participate in the feeding of thousands, literally and metaphorically, in response to Jesus concern that "nothing may be lost." This "sign" and remember that John's gospel is filled with signs is yet another indication of Jesus' messiahship. For the multitude messiahship meant liberation from the Romans. For the author of John it meant participation in the ministry of Jesus, feeding hungry souls.

Jim Burkilo of the Centre for Progressive Christianity tells of leading a group of Stanford University students on a week long exploration of the strawberry industry in California. He tells of a visit to two farmers, a father and a son who are sharecroppers. Sharecropping is the practice of oppressive contracts that force farmers to produce crops for their contract owner. It is economic slavery. A big "strawberry shipper" rents land to a farmer, usually an Hispanic immigrant. The shipper stipulates how the crop is to be planted, how it is to be raised, when it is to be ready for shipment and fixes a price for the produce.

The sharecropper takes all of the risks of crop failure or poor harvest and all of the burden of hiring workers and none of the profits. He simply gets paid the contract price and if he doesn't deliver he doesn't get paid. In the students encounter the questions were at first awkward and the answers curt, says Burkilo. But as the farmers sensed the student's genuine interest and concern the conversation became more intense and animated as the conversation moved away from strawberries to the dignity of the workers and the humanity of the sharecroppers and the inherent injustice of the system. How about lunch?

In his book *Testimony*, which I mentioned several weeks ago, Tom Long tells the story of the late Fred Rogers of children's television fame. Fred Rogers died in 2003 and for several weeks after his death the air-waves were filled with stories about Fred Rogers. One reporter remembered the day when Fred Rogers was invited to address the prestigious National Press Club in Washington. The National Press Club is accustomed to hearing speeches from diplomats, top administration officials, key opinion makers on the top stories of the day, in other words some heavy hitters. Some members of the press privately joked that with "Mister Rogers" on the podium they were probably in for "a light lunch."

But according to the reporter when Fred Rogers got up to speak he said that he knew that the room contained some of the best reporters in the nation, men and women who had achieved much on the national and international stage. He then reminded his audience that none of us get to where we are without someone's else's help, somebody who paved the way or held open the door or wrote us a recommendation or introduced us to someone or saw the potential in us as a child or took a risk on us as a new employee. Rogers then took out his pocket watch and announced that he was going to observe two minutes silence, and he invited everybody in the room to remember people in their past—parents, teachers, coaches, friends, others who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much. And then "Mister Rogers" stood there looking at his watch and saying nothing. The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away but the reporter said that before "Mister Rogers" tucked away his watch one could hear all around the room people sniffing as they were moved by the memories of those who had made sacrifices on their behalf and those who had given them so many gifts. (p.110)

I read that and put the book down, as I often do with Tom Long's stories, and thought about the people in my life and the list is long as I suspect it is in yours. So take the time this morning or this week to think about the people in your life who have made sacrifices for you, people who have gifted you in some special way. Think about those who have gifted us with this most beautiful church, whose generosity and dedication in former decades have made it possible for us to be here today. And take a few minutes to reflect upon how you came to faith. Few of us would say we got it from a book and none of us would say we thought it up on our own. We would think about the people who spoke to us about God, who shared with us their own faith, convinced or questioning, those people who demonstrated in their own daily living the truths and values that we have come to cherish.

Whatever faith we have, large or small, born out of struggle or gift, whether richly nuanced or patched together with Duct tape, whether grasped firmly and held securely or held onto by our broken fingernails, it is a part and parcel of our lives because someone along the way had the courage and the conviction to talk to us about God, to tell us the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Sometimes we take it in by osmosis through the hymns we sang growing up. Washington Gladden was a former journalist and American Congregationalist minister. He was a leader in the Social Gospel Movement and a member of the Progressive Movement at the end of the 19th and beginning of the last century. Gladden was strongly opposed to racial segregation and biblical literalism. A hymn writer he is best known for a hymn that was a staple of my childhood,

O Master, let me walk with thee, in lowly paths of service free;
Teach me thy secret, help me bear the strain of toil, the fret of care.
Teach me thy patience; still with thee, in closer, dearer company,
in work that keeps faith sure and strong, in trust that triumphs over wrong.—VU560

Spend some time today, as Fred Rogers suggested, just a couple of minutes, perhaps over lunch and think about how your faith came to be. Think about those persons who shared their faith with you. Think about this place and how it feeds your spirit, nourishes your soul, slakes your thirst and provides you with opportunities to minister, to grow in faith. Then, give thanks, lift up your voice and sing God's praise. Amen! And to God be the glory!