

Finger Food

Matthew 14:13-21

There are three ways that people of the world eat their food: sticks, fingers and forks. And most of the people in the world today still use their fingers. It's been that way throughout history. In fact, forks were unknown until the 10th century. Knives and spoons only appear in 5th the century.

Jesus ate with his fingers. Does that surprise you? Had you ever thought about Jesus, at meals, and how he ate?

We may not want to admit it, being all civilized and Presbyterian and all, but you and I still love to eat with our fingers. What food disappears first on a buffet table? Finger food. We love those little bites and nibbles and morsels on elegant trays or paper plates that we can pick up, pop in, and chow down, without having to mess around with a knife or fork or spoon.

Every culture has its own favorite finger foods— hors d'oeuvres, tapas, dimsum, pupu. Whatever shape they take they're as fast and easy to eat as they are time-consuming and challenging to make. Chopping, rolling, filling, and frying, these bite-sized creations take more hands-on time than throwing a big turkey or pot roast in the oven and cooking it for 5 hours. But the effort is so worth it.

Maybe eating with our fingers brings us back to our first "accomplishments" as toddlers. Who among us hasn't watched your child or grandchild graduate from being fed, to feeding themselves with their fingers to using a fork, knife and spoon.

Along their road of eating discovery they notice that wonderful appendage known as "the opposable thumb" which facilitates picking Cheerios off the high chair tray and moving it from tray to mouth. It's a moment of pure triumph and joy.

Mastering the "civilized" way to eat with forks or sticks is nowhere near as much fun, but it's a "must" in polite society, even though worrying about whether you're using the right fork can suck all the fun and flavor out of eating.

In fact - there seems to be a correlation between the joy a meal brings and the number of utensils you need to use to enjoy it. I mean, the longer the line-up of cutlery to the left, right, and above the plate, the less likely the food on your plate will be the focus of the meal. "Formal" dinners are all about "form," not food.

Jesus was definitely a finger food kind of guy. Every meal he hosted was a hands-on event. Whether he was breaking off the heads of wheat to munch on as he traveled through the countryside, or sharing a sip of cool water with a woman at a well, Jesus took little notice of formal dining rules.

The wheat-plucking took place on the Sabbath, violating the "working-on-the-day-of-rest" rule, while sharing a sip of water with the woman who had been "married" five times violated all the rules separating the morally "pure" from the morally "impure."

Even after his resurrection, Jesus preferred casual dining — preparing an impromptu, finger food, early morning lakeside fish barbecue for his astonished disciples. Jesus didn't offer utensils, tools or titles as a requirement to recline and dine. Jesus simply spread out a banquet for those he met, and invited them to come and taste and see how good it was, whoever they were and where ever they came from.

"Taste and see that the Lord is good," says the Psalmist (34:8).

Today's text from Matthew, featuring a picnic-banquet, is part of Jesus' "finger food" tradition. All the gospel writers are clear in identifying this group as diners from many different walks of life. "Five thousand" were fed, and nowhere does Jesus ask for credentials. Never does he ask if they are righteous, or observant, or even Jewish. His only request was that they "recline" on the grass, a posture that would let everyone know they could expect a meal.

And there on the grass, listening to Jesus' blessing, seeing the smidgen of food being blessed, knowing there was no secret stash on the other side of the hill, that there was no Costco, or Sam's, or BJ's nearby... the crowd had to wonder who the privileged few would be that were going to be fed. But still they sat. They reclined. They bowed their heads and they listened to Jesus' blessing. In short, they trusted.

And then they received. A satisfying, filling, overabundance came their way, and kept on coming. With every chunk of bread ripped off a loaf, with every morsel of fish devoured, the magnitude of the miracle they were eating and living became more and more clear.

Jesus first healed their bodies, then fed their bellies, and finally showed them all the presence of God's power and authority. The banquet of finger food Jesus provided revealed the Messiah in their midst. Regardless of who they were or what they had done or where they had been in life, Jesus fed them. Then and there, together, and gave them all they needed for that moment of time and for the times to come in life.

How is it that we, the body of Christ, have forgotten how to sit on the grass and eat with our fingers? How is it that we forget to focus on the feast we've been offered and instead fuss over the utensils used to eat with?

I mean, we line up and scrutinize the title's and names we've given ourselves, like "pastor", or "assistant pastor," or "youth minister," or "Missional," or "Emergent," or "Postmodern," or even "United Methodist," "Baptist," "Presbyterian," or "Lutheran," or "Elder" or "church goer", or "born again", or ... the list goes on.

We've become so concerned with what our titles are and how we use our "utensils" that we forget about the meal, the soul sustenance that Jesus offers us, which is the reason we gather together as a community of disciples. We use our titles as a way to distinguish who's "in" and who's "out".

We have been invited to dine at the table where the Bread of Life is served, and we jockey for position and elbow the "undeserving" out of the way.

Jesus constantly "got grief" because he came "eating and drinking" with undesirables, but it was at formal banquets in the homes of "bad guys" and impromptu "picnics" for five thousand unknowns, and Passover Seders transformed into the first "Last Supper," that Jesus revealed the depth and richness of the life he offered.

Jesus used a finger-food dining approach as a prelude to the hands-nailed sacrifice he'd make on our behalf. At all the meals Jesus presided over he "took," and "blessed," and "broke," and "gave."

He "took" the failures and fears of the people, and relieved them of their burdens. He "blessed" us with his presence, his teachings, his miracles, and his sacrifice. He "broke" bread with us and allowed the wicked of the world to break his body in order to break the power of sin and death that threatened to shackle mankind forever, keeping us chained away from the table of grace and forgiveness.

He “gave” himself, the Bread of Life, as the main course in the one meal that sustains us for a lifetime.

Jesus invited us bums, outcasts, losers, whiners and wrecks to the banquet in order that we might feast on the goodness of his grace, enjoy the richness of his royalty, bask in the blessing of his being.

And having done so, having been brought out of the pits and gutters and muck of our sinfulness, we should do the same for others, that they might know the joy of Jesus. Amen.