The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
10:00 a.m.
August 31, 2025

"Food for Thought"

By a show of hands, how many of you have ever served a meal to someone? As I expected, most, if not all of you, have. Here is another question: how many have served as waiters in a restaurant, café, or other eating establishments? This could include bar tenders and baristas. Not as many, but a goodly number. How many of you have served a meal at a soup kitchen or worked at a food pantry? Still a goodly number if not quite as many.

Serving food is a nourishing experience. Not just for the person receiving the food who is nourished in body, but also for the server who is nourished in their spirit. There is something gratifying about fulfilling someone's basic need for food. I think of hostesses who fuss over guests whom they think could put on a little weight. This is particularly true when the guest is a college student or boyfriend.

As we read the Gospel of Luke this year, we have to notice that Jesus is always participating in what churchy people call "table fellowship." That is, it seems that he is either headed to a meal or just left one every time we encounter him. The people he meets, whether they be admirers or skeptics, want to sit down with him, eat with him, and learn from him.

That is well and good, but what we may miss is that even though Jesus may fall into the category of the poor, there are lots of other poor people who do not make it to the table of those who host Jesus. After all, who wants to have vagrants, the impoverished, the unclean, or the ill-kempt sitting at their dinner table? Their condition might put us off our food. We feed them out the back door if we feed them at all.

We prejudge these people, fellow children of God made just as we are in God's image. We think they are poor by choice because they are lazy or stupid. We think they choose to be unclean and shabby in appearance. We think they will have poor table manners and nothing interesting to add to the conversation. Honestly, we do not want to be seen in their presence. After all, our peers might think we like being around such people and not invite us into their homes for fear of how it will reflect on them.

As most of you are aware, we are working with an organization called Viva Community to help foster closer relationships in our town and wider community. The concept is that we invite the entire community to come share a meal with others. It is not just about feeding the poor, who are certainly welcome, but about feeding everyone. Plus, we sit at tables with those we do not know. We share food conversations, names, joys, sorrows, trials, and victories. We get to know our neighbors and tear down barriers in the process.

Viva Community is the brainchild of Tom Sweitzer and Andres Uribe. When they came to me with this concept, I thought it was a great idea. When I presented it to the Community Engagement Committee of the vestry, they agreed. The entire vestry gave their unanimous support for the idea and Emmanuel's involvement in it. Everyone recognized that there are many social, economic, and educational barriers between people in Middleburg. As a relative newcomer to the area myself, I know how hard it is to become part of the community. It is even more so for people who do not live in town but on farms or in smaller contiguous communities like Atoka, Upperville, old Aldie, etc.

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What makes the concept even more attractive is the cost. Tom had laid the groundwork before he even came to us with the idea of partnership. He has gotten the support of several local benefactors to cover all the costs of the project. We can host these meals and programs while only paying for the electricity to turn on the lights and run the dishwasher.

As the gospel reading today tells us[1], hosting a meal for those who do not have to pay you back, much less those who cannot pay you back, is the way of Jesus. I know of very few who invite the people that Jesus describes into their home. But inviting them, indeed everyone, into the church to share a meal, especially a potluck meal, is a way to begin. It is a way to get to know our neighbors, rich, poor, and in between. We can make acquaintances that grow into friendships. We learn about others' lives, how they came to Middleburg, the work they do, their beliefs and hopes, and their dreams. It could be that we grow so close to these folks that they become our preferred guests when we entertain at home.

How much richer our lives are when we do not live in a homogenized bubble. The "Middleburg bubble" is unique. It gives us a sense of safety. We think we know those with whom we share this lovely place. However, the truth is, we know only a select few. By expanding our circle of acquaintances and friends, we begin to understand the even greater variety of people with whom we share this place.

This idea is not new with Jesus. As we heard in other readings today, welcoming the stranger, foreigner, impoverished, ill, and disabled into our lives is a command of God from the earliest parts of scripture. In nomadic and desert cultures, it was essential for survival. In practical terms, think about how scarce water and food sources are in the desert and rocky wilderness of the Middle East. In human terms, it is just as essential because we need the companionship of others to get through life. As John Dunne wrote:

> "No man is an island
> Entire of itself;
> Every man is a piece of the continent,
> A part of the main."[2]

We do not understand the interconnectedness of our lives, how each life fits into the web of existence. What we know is that God loves each of us equally. Each one of us is God's favorite. A concept that, in our limited ability to love, we cannot comprehend. However, we can commune with each other at the table of the Lord, and at other tables and in other times and places. By doing so, we begin to understand how God loves. When we strive to fulfill God's commands, we become a part of that lovingkindness that is God.

[1] Luke 14: 1,1 7-14

[2] John Dunne, "No Man is an Island" https://allpoetry.com/No-man-is-an-island accessed August 28, 2025.

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