

“Room Enough for All”

There is a tradition in the South, in places like North Carolina, Tennessee, and southern Virginia, to go out for breakfast after church on Sunday. These folks are not going out to get brunch with a mimosa or bloody Mary, eggs benedict, cheese grits soufflé and the like. Nope, they are headed for the all-you-can-eat buffet at places like K&W Cafeteria, Old Country Buffet, or Bob Evans. This is so important to folks that I have heard stories of towns where the churches arranged their service schedules so that they would not have to wait in line behind another church at the buffet.

The first time I ever experienced this was in Raleigh NC. I accompanied my girlfriend and her grandmother to the Methodist Church that Sunday. After church Libbie’s grandmother told us she wanted to take us out to eat. When we arrived at to the K&W Cafeteria I was surprised by the mob. It was hard to find a parking place. When we entered the din of clattering plates, conversation, and the clicking of knives and forks was overwhelming. The servers in their uniforms calling everyone “sweetheart” while taking their drink orders, for orange juice, coffee or sweet tea—mimosas were not on the menu. The line servers carrying large hot pans of scrambled eggs, sausage, grits, bacon, biscuits and toast to the buffet line added to the noise and confusion. The only option for your meal was the buffet. Nothing was made to order. The whole operation was designed to over feed as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Fine dining it was not, but there was plenty of it and nothing ever ran out.

I do not think this is what God had in mind when he lowered his smorgasbord on a sheet as Peter sat praying. God’s idea was not that we would be stuffing ourselves after worship. It was more about hospitality. God was showing Peter that people were no longer to be separated by the foods that they were allowed to eat.

One of the most ubiquitous parts of Jesus’ ministry was what we call table fellowship or breaking bread together. People got to know Jesus and his teaching by having a meal with him. It became one the signature acts of Christian community, the Lord’s Supper, a symbolic meal shared with others. Christians have expanded the symbolic meal into Agape meals, church picnics, feeding programs, coffee hours, love feasts, brunch, and breakfast at the K&W. Eating together is an important part of church life.

But this revelation to Peter was more than just a sign of what could be eaten. It also included who could be at the table with you. Note the line where Peter reports to the council that after he had the vision there were “three men, sent to me from Caesarea . . . The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” What does the name of their town of origin tell us? These are Gentiles probably Romans who live in a town named after Caesar, the Emperor who calls himself a god. These men are sent to test Peter’s new understanding of belonging.

Peter could reject these men as pagans who are unclean to eat with or he could accept the new revelation to him and share food with them, because they are also children of God. It is a new understanding of the faith. No longer does one have to convert to Judaism on the way to becoming a follower of Jesus, a Christian. Gentiles have their own way into the new Kingdom of God.

This is dramatic and changes the course of expansion for this nascent religion. If Christianity were to remain a sub-sect of Judaism its spread would have been much

more difficult. A Gentile would have to convert to Judaism and follow its 613 commandments before being able to join the Jesus Movement. It could end up being a long process and a stumbling block to conversion.

But now through this revelation to Peter the whole landscape has changed. When the Christian leaders in Jerusalem hear what was revealed to Peter and how he responded they are convinced that the Holy Spirit has opened a new doorway for Gentile converts. According to the passage their criticism of Peter was silenced “And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’”

However, as it goes with most things human, too often we praise God’s generosity with one hand while the other hand is held up to stop the newcomer, the stranger, the outsider, and the one who does not look or behave like us outside the door. Humans have this tendency that once we become an insider we do not want to share the benefits with someone who does not seem just like us unless they will enhance our prestige. It is a sad situation and one we have to work at to overcome.

The stopping hand can be manifested in how we greet people or if we greet them at all, who we lend a helping hand to, who we welcome to sit at our table, or how we have our tables arranged. An example is how the tables are arranged in our Fellowship Hall.

We set up our tables up so they are completely separated. Looking at it from above like a Busby Berkley musical it might look nice and symmetrical, but what happens as a result? People are separated. We sit at our usual table and never share coffee and conversation with those at the other table. I do not think anyone is being exclusionary or mean, but by the way we arrange the room we isolate ourselves. What’s more when a visitor comes they do not know why there are these little cliques and who they should join. In contrast I have noticed that when we have food at the center tables, people are less likely to sit in separated groups and the fellowship time lasts longer.

I offer this only as an observation and not a judgment. But this is how we end up dividing ourselves perhaps harmlessly but in ways that make a difference. We must always be aware that we are representatives of God. Our greeting, welcome, generosity or lack thereof speaks volumes to others. To paraphrase William J. Toms, “Be mindful of how you live; you may be the only Bible someone ever reads.” And there is another aphorism relevant here, “Actions speak louder than words.”

Let us be ever mindful of how we live our lives in church and in the world. Let us be cognizant of how our simplest actions may injure or exclude another. Let us be aware of those around us especially the stranger. We were strangers once and God opened the door for us through food and fellowship. As Peter said, “who are we to hinder God?”