

Come to the Table

- l) I grew up believing – naively as this sounds, that everyone came from big families, and that every Sunday lots of people gathered at their grandmother’s house for supper. Having no choice but to follow my father’s rules; I never tested this theory- because I was never anywhere but at my grandmother’s house eating a big meal every Sunday afternoon. This was a weekly ritual that carried on long after my grandmother’s death. After she passed away; one of her daughters would host the Sunday meal. All sexism aside: This was a sign of the times and the way of life in the 1960s!

The Sunday meal went like this: Family would begin gathering around 1:30 or 2 o’clock in the afternoon. Other than our grandmother (my grandfather, her husband, died before I was born), everyone just showed up and filled the living spaces! As you might suspect; my aunts had already arrived at least an hour earlier than the rest of the family. They would show up early to help my grandmother cook. Grandma’s sons would enter, kiss their mother, and then sit down at the table. Once they sat down, the women would serve them wine, and put some canned peppers, pepperoni, and cheese on the table. From under a towel, grandma would bring out a basket of warm bread. The knife and cutting board placed alongside the bread basket. All the while things were happening in the kitchen, the grandchildren were – if weather permitted, playing outside. Or, if it was winter or raining outside; the kids were in the living room trying to find room to play, and not knock over the card tables and chairs. You see; the card tables and chairs were our dining room” furniture . . . Better known as, the kid’s tables! The card tables were spaced with enough room between the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, so that our aunts could serve us our supper meal. And, that space allowed any of our uncles the opportunity to come into the room and pull our ear (until we yelled!) because we were misbehaving!

The visual stage is set for our Sunday gathering, but even more important were the smells throughout the house. Actually, those smells hit you when you opened the door into grandma’s mud room (off the kitchen). You could smell intense garlic and onion smells. The closer you got to the kitchen counter right inside the door, the stronger the smell of freshly baked bread. If you were lucky, grandma would let you stir the sauce. And, if you stayed long enough; she would ladle a spoonful and wait for it to cool before moving it towards your lips. Once you know the “routine”, you are foolish not to hang around and get early tastings to the best sauce in the neighborhood!

At some point, it is determined that all is ready for the meal. Kids are scurried out of the kitchen and into the living room. The kitchen table is cleared of everything but the men’s wine glasses, and the serving begins! The menu went something like this: [more] homemade bread, pasta in

the sauce, some type of meat (not always meatballs!) and salad (which, depending on the time of year, might include dandelions!). All this food was not served at once. Things came out slowly. My grandmother monitored table activity, and when it looked like one dish was almost finished; she would signal to my aunts that it was time for them to serve the next part of the meal. One of the “down” sides to being seated at the kid’s table: The course changed when the adults were ready, no matter if you finished your food or not! I watched cousins lose their half-eaten pasta because the men were ready to eat the next course!

I must report, that in true stereotypical (Italian) fashion; homemade wine flowed at the table. The kids were given a juice glass filled halfway with wine when the pasta was served. It was always referred to as grandpa’s wine. But, at some point his wine had to have been all drunk. So, what I think I remember was the uncles talking about this wine as his- because they made it according to his recipe?! When the main courses were eaten, the table was cleared (in both rooms) and the dessert brought out. If it was a birthday, we ate cake baked by one of the aunts. If it was just any Sunday; we ate grandma’s cookies. Translated for the non-Italian readers; we ate pizzelles and biscotti. Biscotti is not unfamiliar to most people because it has taken on a life of its own as a dunking cookie with coffee. Pizzelles are round, flat cookies pressed like a waffle. Both cookies are made from simple ingredients. However, in my growing up, these cookies offered a strong smell that I could not name until I was much older. My grandmother and her daughters baked these cookies with a heavy-handed amount of anise! Anise is a spice, that when crushed, puts off a strong licorice smell and taste. Anise was a spice not that familiar to my classmates in grade school. I can still remember the funny looks on their faces, when at the lunch table they’d ask what I was eating and when I told them to “have some”; one smell and it was all over! (The more for me!)

Every Sunday, no matter at whose house we visited; the meal was always the central part of our day. And, no matter where; the table was always the heart of our gathering.

- II) Today’s scripture text, a familiar story for most, has a few “hidden” pieces that we sometimes miss. Most of our attention when we think of this story almost always goes to the happening at the table when the travelers stop for their night’s meal. Few remember that this story takes place just hours after the resurrection of Jesus? It’s [Easter] Sunday night, probably dusk. If it’s when the light is leaving the sky, it’ll help explain why these two travelers do not recognize Jesus when they meet him on the road. As these two welcome the stranger, and it is asked why they seem so disturbed; you hear the two retelling all that had happened the past three days. There’s an obvious sense of grief in their words. And, maybe this sadness is why they do not yet recognize the stranger? Grieving people are often lost in despair which can blind them to what’s in front of them.

It’s shocking to us, the reader, that even when the stranger rebukes these two for doubting all the prophets had said about this man; still their eyes do not see who is with them at that moment!

And then, when they arrive at their stopping place for the night, the two travelers extend an invitation to the stranger to stay and eat; he accepts their invitation and sits at the table with them. When the server brings over some bread, the stranger picks up the bread and breaks it. He asks a blessing, then offers some to each of these men. And in that moment, they knew! It was in the breaking of the bread that they recognized Jesus. Because of this one action; it is not difficult to acknowledge that this moment in particular is what most of us remember about the Emmaus event.

This gospel story has always been one of my favorites to share. There's a lot of emotion wrapped up in the culmination of their time together. Two sad and weary, frightened travelers who welcome a stranger to carry their story one more person along . . . But at the table, their heart and souls are set afire with the realization that Jesus truly was risen!

At the table this miracle occurred. At the table, we gather so often to remember. At the table we set down our differences. At the table, we welcome the stranger.

- III) I've been thinking a lot about the ways we are praying these days. There is such an emphasis on our losses. This pandemic has heightened our awareness of death, illness, isolation, distancing. Thinking about prayer- within the context of today's scripture text; I'd like to offer another way of praying. Using our memories as ways to enter into prayer.

I've been cooking a lot! The sauce I make for the pasta is a variation of my grandmother's sauce. I "beg" her forgiveness each time I open canned tomatoes. She always used tomatoes from her garden. And, I was often the one who got to "smash" them (after they'd been peeled) in the big pot, before they were started as the next pan of sauce! But, one part of the sauce making hasn't changed, the onions and garlic that are cooked in olive oil before beginning to add all the ingredients and spices. The cooking of the onions and garlic offer smells that transport me back, and the many years of memories around the kids' table and the smells and sounds in the kitchen.

When I remember these moments, I lift everyone around those tables in prayer. Thanking those who've gone before me for the nourishment and love. And praying for my cousins and their families as we stay safe, and (sadly) apart.

These memories don't have to be of meals eaten. As I said in the beginning; my thinking was child-like in believing that everyone went to their grandma's house for a big Sunday supper. Your memories can recall celebrations, family reunions, or other times together with those family who have loved you into the person you are today.

Lift those people. Those who are gone and those who are now physically separated from you. Remember those moments.

May your memory prayers be held by a loving God.