

“LIFE AFTER BRUNCH”

a sermon by

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Text: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

2 Timothy 3:14-15

Rally Day is always a great celebration. We gather together, kick-off a new year for our ministry of Christian education, and, of course, we eat.

Throughout all of its history, the church has always been good at celebrations. And food is often at the heart of these grand events. This tradition even predates the beginning of the Christian Church. As told in *The Jewish Journal*, “Eating can be an emotionally charged issue given its integral role in Jewish practice. The ubiquity of food is illustrated in the oft-repeated definition of Jewish holidays: They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat.”

The celebration of Rally Day may not be as dramatic as surviving an attempt on our lives. But, this remains a great day of celebration. So, we eat!

The Power of the Story

Today the larger church is good at celebrating, especially if food is involved. But these grand events should be more than food. Each and every time that we celebrate with a meal, the celebration should be about a story.

The power of our stories is very much at the heart of Leonard Sweet's Soul Salsa. Leonard writes and speaks often about the power and the purpose of our stories. Stories provide a sense of purpose and identity. At their best, shared stories are about relationships. He even goes on to suggest that we should surround ourselves with stuff that has meaning. The value of our possessions – the real and personal value – is no greater than the story that goes along with it.

In my family home, there are a number of possessions that Mrs. Green and I have inherited from our grandparents. Of this old stuff that we enjoy, none is displayed more prominently than a large flag that hangs in our living room. To be more precise, it's actually only one-half of a two-star Admiral's flag.

In and of itself, the flag is nothing more than a wind-torn rag. It has absolutely no monetary value. But, to us, this flag has a wonderful story. Just after the First World War, Mrs. Green's grandfather graduated from the United States Naval Academy. His military career included service under the commands of Chester Nimitz and of Bill Halsey. Her grandfather served as a ship's Captain of the aircraft carrier, Altamaha (a word that means "leaky canoe"), and for many years, was the commanding officer of the Naval Air Station –Dallas. After some 35 years of service to the Navy, he retired and began working for a defense contractor. A friend and colleague working in the Pentagon found that an error had been made when calculating his rank. This man should have retired as a Rear Admiral. The Navy corrected its mistake with the appropriate promotion. As a sign of respect and a courtesy, the two-star flag was flown when he was in Virginia aboard the USS Hornet. The stiff Virginia wind ripped the flag in half, leaving only the portion that remains in our living room.

Any good preservationist can tell you that our flag is improperly displayed. It's mounted with some glue; and, the frame offers absolutely no protection from the surrounding light. We don't care. This flag is valuable to us – but, not for its significance in the history of our nation. The flag's value is found only in its story. Its value is all about relationship. It's all about our family. The flag by itself is little more than a rag. But, the story about the flag tells you something about who we are. The story tells you about what we value and what we believe. It can be said that the collective stories of our family provide the very context for our identity as a family.

A Story of Our Faith

The collective stories of our family provide the very context for our identity as a family. That statement is true not only of our families. It is also true of the church. The collective stories of our church provide the very context for our identity as a church. Take, for example, that old saying about Jewish celebrations. "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat."

One of the great examples of that statement is the story of the Exodus from Egypt. You may remember the story of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. Moses went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go." Pharaoh said, "No!"

What followed was a series of plagues throughout the land of the Egyptians. The final of these plagues was the death of the first-born of all living things. Before that particular plague, God instructed the Hebrew people to slaughter a lamb, and to paint their doorposts using the blood of the lamb. As death crossed over and throughout the land of the Egyptians, the Hebrew people were spared from that dreadful plague.

Afterwards, the Lord God instituted the feast of the Passover, an annual observance of the night that God led his people from bondage to freedom. The importance of the annual feast is rooted in the power of the story. Even today the Passover is celebrated with a magnificent feast and also with a story.

Throughout the meal there is a series of questions and answers that teach about the different foods on the table. The lamb bone is a reminder of the paschal lamb that was sacrificed. The unleavened bread, the matzo, is used because the Hebrew people left in a hurry and the bread baked while it was being carried on their backs. Saltwater represents the salty tears that were shed while wandering the wilderness. Bitter herbs speak of the hardships endured. Sweet charoset – a mixture of fruit, honey and nuts – represents the sweetness that we enjoy in life. At one point, the bitter herbs and charoset are mixed together because life often mixes the bitter and the sweet.

Throughout the meal, children learn about their family. They also learn about their God. "They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat."

As Christians, we remember that the Passover Feast remains an important part of our faith story. Jesus was at the Passover Feast, together with his disciples, when he strayed from the predictable script. In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul tells of the events in this way:

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

As Christians, we find value in the telling and the retelling of the story. This is true because the collective stories of our faith provide the context for our very identity as the people of God.

The Importance of the Storyteller

The Apostle Paul understood the importance of the stories of our faith. Even more than that, he also appreciated the importance of the storyteller.

Remember the story of that flag in my living room. The importance of that remnant is derived from my respect and affection for the family that I married into. So, too, is this true of the stories of our faith. The importance of the Passover and of our Communion is strengthened when these stories are told by people of integrity.

This is at the heart of Paul’s comment to his friend and student, Timothy.

“Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings... what persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.”

Because Timothy had observed Paul’s faithfulness through all of his trials and tribulations, and because Paul remained faithful throughout these things, Paul could appeal to their relationship. Because of their relationship, Paul had earned the authority to encourage Timothy, saying, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it....”

Relationships don’t always work for the benefit of the church. Through my years in ordained ministry, I have met many people who say that they are not Christians. But, through our conversations I learn that some – really many – of these people believe in God and even speak of Jesus as their Savior. Inevitably I will learn that these people have had some life-changing, faith-damaging interaction with some Church. For these people the words of Paul make no sense because they have observed someone’s wrong teaching, misconduct, and misguided aim in life, in addition to a lack of faith, patience, love, or steadfastness.

This morning’s New Testament text includes a beautiful description of our sacred writings. “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.:

The original language used by Paul speaks of scripture, quite literally, as being “God-breathed.” The image is that of the very breath of God giving life to his Holy Word. But, we cannot speak of scripture as being “God-breathed” when, as a general rule, we are ourselves are thought to be full of hot air.

Graham Greene, in his great novel *The Power and the Glory*, wrote, “There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.” For some it may be said that ‘there was one moment in childhood when the doors slammed shut and the future was forever locked out.’ The collective stories of our faith provide the very context for our identity as the people of God. This remains true even when the story goes terribly awry.

There are many jokes about Presbyterians and our food. There is the joke about a group of students who were asked to bring to class something that was important to their faith. The Muslim student brought a prayer rug, a Roman Catholic student brought a Rosary, and the Presbyterian student brought a casserole dish.

We may joke about it, but the fact remains that brunch is important. Church meals are important not because the food is good; although, the food is very good. Church meals are not important because they are fun; even though they are great fun.

Church meals are important because they provide an opportunity for the people of God to demonstrate our teaching, our conduct, and our aim in life. At church meals we display our faith, our patience, our love, and even our steadfastness.

Rally Day is a great celebration and it does involve a great meal. But, more than that, Rally Day is a great opportunity to have a positive effect on someone's life after brunch.

END NOTES