

Mitt Romney, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Hilary Clinton, Donald Trump. What do all of these 2016 candidates for President have in common? (That's a loaded question I know.) The answer I'm looking for is that during their campaigns, they all ate at the Red Arrow Diner. So far this cycle, the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester has already been visited by Bill Weld and Tim Ryan with many more candidates surely to come through as primary day nears. But don't worry, this is not a political sermon... it's gastronomic.

From food laws to fruit trees, living water to the Last Supper itself, our readings today all involve eating and drinking. This most basic and common act--eating and drinking--holds much significance in our lives. From when, to what, to where, to how, and with whom we eat--food is now and has always been a controversial subject. Hence our attention with what, where, how, and with whom politicians eat on the campaign trail. It's why they stop by local diners in the first place--there's a feeling that food can connect people, that you can get to know someone in a particular kind of way over a shared meal--that lives, and perhaps even votes, can be changed over food.

It's striking that in this story from Acts, the issue that Peter's colleagues have with him is *not* that he shared the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ with the uncircumcised, it's that he *ate* with them. Funny, the Pharisees took issue with Jesus for the same thing. And here are some Jesus-followers shortly after the resurrection, falling for that same false belief--that some people are somehow not worthy to eat with. Well, anyone who went to middle school knows that the lunch table remains a place of

exclusion to this day. And yet, the table is also the place where true transformation can, and does happen.

Derek Black grew up as the heir apparent to the white nationalist movement. Following in his father's footsteps, he championed white nationalism online and in-person from childhood into his college years. During his first year in college, Derek was outted to his fellow students as a white nationalist, and while many chose to condemn and distance themselves from him, Matthew Stevenson, one of the only Orthodox Jewish students on campus, invited Derek to join him for Shabbat dinner. For the next two years Derek and Matthew, and many other students shared Shabbat dinners together and through honest conversation and personal encounter, Derek's heart and mind were changed. Today he is an outspoken critic of white nationalism and shares how his experience of being challenged within the context of intimate conversations over a shared meal changed his life. Reflecting on this transformation, Black states that what changed him was "empathizing with people who were not 'supposed' to be part of [his] group." He realized that when the actions and beliefs of "his group" were hurting the perceived "other group" then he needed to change those beliefs and actions.

Another example of the power of empathy and connection over shared meals is the life and witness of one the great saints of our time who just died this month, Jean Vanier. In 1964, Jean Vanier, a French-Canadian veteran and philosopher, moved into a home in a small French village with two men who had intellectual disabilities. Thus began the first of now hundreds of

L'Arche homes located across the globe where able-bodied "assistants" live with "core members" who are persons with intellectual disabilities. All of the residents in these L'Arche communities share in cooking, eating, laughing, praying, singing, and living together. Vanier wrote extensively about how his life shared with core members at various L'Arche homes shaped him, especially over shared meals. "To eat at the same table," he writes, "is to become friends. ... Communities of faith, of God's reign, bring together into oneness those who by culture and by education are far apart. This is the body of Christ. This is the church. The poor are evangelized. They discover they are loved. But even more, the poor evangelize. They possess a healing power that awakens and transforms the hearts of the rich."

That's what happened to Peter's colleagues when they heard the good news that Peter had eaten with those uncircumcised men--well, first, they were silenced, when they realized their self-righteousness and prejudice, but then they rejoiced, praising God and saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!" The poor, in this case, those who had been outside of God's covenant with Israel, the Gentiles, who had been deemed "unclean," received Peter's message and were blessed. But the rich, in this case, the Jesus-followers, were also blessed because the boundaries of their "group" were expanded, and they were able to see the "other" as God does--as beloved.

It makes me wonder if Peter's vision of this heavenly picnic wasn't simply about the fact that he was now free to eat bacon and lobster. "What

God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Perhaps that’s less about food and more about human beings. We are *all* beloved children of God--whoever we are, just as we are. No matter our race, religion, gender, class, abilities, or even politics, we are all loved by God no more and no less than anyone else. We might wish that weren’t the case, but it is. And that is the gospel message that Peter proclaimed even to the Gentiles--that God’s love is for all and that there is to be no distinction among human beings as to who is in or who is out of the bounds of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

It’s much easier to put up walls, to circle the wagons, or to walk by on the other side of the road and ignore our neighbor. It’s easier to turn our backs on the new kid or to look down on someone whose brokenness is less hidden than our own. But the truth is, when we do that, we not only hurt them, we hurt ourselves. That’s why, on the last night Jesus had with his disciples, he told them to love one another as he loved them. That is--with a self-sacrificial, boundary-crossing, loving, liberating, life-giving love. It’s that kind of love that makes transformation possible whether in church sanctuaries or church basements, at Shabbat dinners or L’Arche lunches, at coffee hour or at the Red Arrow Diner. When we respect the dignity of every human being and show up willing to give *and* receive love, then our lives can be transformed, communities can be renewed, and we can get a taste of the gift of water that comes from the spring of the water of life.

Amen.