

Meal-Sharing

Series: *Marks of a Thriving Church*

Oct. 23, 2022

Acts 2:42-47 etc.

Over a quarter century ago—before Cornerstone was even called Cornerstone— this congregation consisted of 35 founding members. And all but two of those founding members were of Chinese heritage.

Maybe you're newer here, and never realized that Cornerstone had its origins in the ethnic Chinese church. We were planted by one of the flagship Chinese churches in the GTA, and that church was part of an association that included many other Chinese churches.

However, our founding members, led by Pastor Andrew, had a heart to plant an intercultural church. They knew that through the cross of Jesus, God brings diverse peoples together into one family of faith. As the Bible says in Ephesians:

Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us [people from all kinds of different backgrounds] to embrace..."¹

And now, over 25 years later, by God's grace, Cornerstone has well over 40 different countries of origin represented in our congregation. Here in Markham—Canada's most diverse city— God continues to shape us into a church family, united in Christ, that very much reflects the diverse makeup of the greater community where God has planted us.

Can we give God some praise for that?

But those of you who were with us in those early days know that at the time our congregation was predominately Chinese. I wasn't here when the church was first planted, but came along very soon thereafter, and so over the years I've had the privilege of making lots of Chinese friends, and learning a fair bit about Chinese culture. Not to mention the fact that Chinese food has become one of my favourite cuisines.

Indeed, in Chinese culture, a very high value is placed on eating together.

It's not the only "eating-together culture" that there is, but it's one I've had the opportunity to connect with more closely than others. And generally speaking, Chinese families and friends tend to gather around tables much more regularly than do folks from, say, my own cultural heritage.

One Chinese blogger explains that:

¹ Ephesians 2:16 (MSG)

Dining tables in the Chinese culture have a symbolic meaning in our history. Most of the tables where we dine are round, as we often see in Chinese restaurants. What does this symbolize, anyway? Round has the meaning of “reunion” and “gathering”. Therefore, especially during Chinese New Year, it is very important that all family members sit and eat together around the table... ²

In Chinese culture, as in many other cultures, meals shared at tables bring people together. But: **Nothing brings people together like Jesus’ table does.**

That’s what we’re going to talk about for the rest of today’s message.

We’re continuing in our series called *Marks of a Thriving Church*. The series is based on Acts chapter 2 verse 42 to 47. Would you open your heart to God’s Word now, as we read that passage?

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. ³

In this passage, we see a list of marks that are essential for any church that wants to thrive—marks against which we can measure the life of this church, and our personal lives as well.

Today, we’re going to explore how the early church devoted themselves to meal-sharing. In other words, they *ate together* often.

Okay, how many of you like to eat? Roughly 100% of you.

So you’re already halfway there. You’ve got the *eat* part down, and now what we’re aiming to do as a church is to make eating *together* a priority. Because Jesus calls us to follow the example of the Acts 2 church, and as we read in verse 42, they “*devoted themselves to... sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper)*”, and then it goes on to say in verse 46 that they, “*met in homes for the Lord’s Supper and shared their meals with great joy and generosity.*”

² <https://theculturalfrontier.wordpress.com/2013/06/20/eat-together-on-the-table/>

³ Acts 2:42-47 (NLT)

If Jesus calls us to follow the example of how the Acts 2 church did meal-sharing, it's important to understand that those first Christians followed the example of Jesus himself in this regard.

The book of Acts was written by Luke as a companion volume to his gospel. Luke's gospel is about what Jesus began to do and teach, and Acts is about what Jesus continued to do and teach by his Spirit in and through the church. ⁴

In Luke's gospel, we find Jesus at the table, again and again, with people of all kinds. He's constantly talking about tables and eating and meals and feasts and banquets and so forth.

And nearly every time Jesus sits down to eat in the gospel of Luke, God's love and grace are revealed in powerful, unexpected and even controversial ways.

By the time we get to Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, we find the first Christians, filled with the Spirit of Jesus, continuing the kind of radical table ministry that Jesus had begun.

In the footsteps of those first Christians, we are called to meal-sharing that *welcomes outsiders* as well as meal-sharing that *unites a diverse church family*.

Let's talk about each of those two points.

First of all, as a church:

1. We are called to meal-sharing that WELCOMES OUTSIDERS.

Obviously, we want to welcome outsiders in more ways than just meal-sharing. But meal-sharing is especially important when it comes to welcoming outsiders. Why? Because, as Bible scholar Will Willimon says, "We know from experience that social boundaries are most rigidly enforced at the table."

I remember sheepishly carrying my tray into the school cafeteria back when I was in junior high. Who could I sit with? Distinct social groupings had gathered together at their respective tables: jocks, nerds, brains, townies, band geeks.

I was a band geek, and oh, to find anyone from my own tribe to sit with during lunch was always a huge relief. Because social boundaries are rigidly enforced at school cafeteria tables, and for many to have to eat alone is a horrible fate, because it can make you feel like you don't belong, like you're not accepted.

⁴ See Acts 1:1

You see, like nothing else, the table says something about who's in and who's out.

This was especially the case in biblical times. Sitting down to eat with people—*table fellowship*, as they called it—was very much about who was in and who was out— who was included in your circle, and who was excluded.

Which leads us to ask: How did Jesus to table fellowship? Who did Jesus dine with?

For starters, **Jesus dined with religious outcasts and sinners.**

We read in Luke 15 that:

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and the teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!⁵

One of the better descriptions of the gospel you'll ever hear is, "Jesus ate good food with bad people."

In response to the religious leaders' objection to this, Jesus tells a parable about a son who rejects his father, leaves home, and squanders his inheritance in depraved living. Destitute, the young man eventually comes to his senses, and returns to his father with his tail between his legs, repentant. He knows he's no longer worthy to be called his father's son, but he holds out hope that his father might hire him as a servant.

Many of you know what happens next. The father sees his returning son from a long way off, and against all social propriety, hikes up his robes so he can run up the road to embrace the young man. And among other things, the father says to his servants:

"Quick! ...Kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead, and now has returned to life. He was lost, but now he was found." So the party began. (Luke 15:22-24)⁶

In this parable, Jesus was basically saying to the religious leaders, and to all, "This is what God is up to. In me," says Jesus, "God is extending forgiveness and redemption to morally and spiritually wayward people. With open arms, God is welcoming all lost children home, to feast at his table."

⁵ Luke 15:1-2 (NLT)

⁶ Luke 15:22-24 (NLT)

And so, Jesus eats with sinners. He accepts them as they are, but as they dine with the Messiah, they don't *stay* as they are. Because lives are redeemed and transformed when sinners sit down to eat with the Lord of the Table.

The fact that Jesus eats good food with bad people is good news for sinners. It's good news for you and me. The Bible reminds us:

For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.⁷

But the question before us as a church is this: Do our table habits reflect those of our Lord? When we share meals, do we save seats for unbelievers, for religious outsiders, for spiritual seekers, for people of other faiths, however rough-around-the edges they may seem to us?

Are they welcome at our table? Are they welcome in our church? Are they welcome in your life, in your dining room, and on your back yard patio?

Indeed, **Jesus dined with socially marginalized people** of many kinds—the kind of people who might often eat alone today. Do you ever dine with people on the margins?

In Luke 14:12-14, Jesus gives these instructions:

When you put on a luncheon or a banquet... don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then, at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.⁸

May marginalized people of all kinds always find welcoming acceptance here at Cornerstone. May they always find Jesus' embrace, through you and me. May they always have a seat at the table.

For followers of Jesus, the table is never a place to demonstrate our exclusiveness. Rather, it's always a place to demonstrate God's radical inclusiveness. Meal-sharing is the heart of hospitality, and hospitality is about welcoming the stranger—the other, the outsider. In fact, biblical hospitality is among Cornerstone's Core Values:

Biblical Hospitality: We welcome the stranger into our church, homes, hearts, and lives, as God has welcomed us in Christ.

⁷ See Romans 3:23

⁸ Luke 14:12-14 (NLT)

That's what the first Christians did in their table fellowship, because, as we've seen, it's what Jesus did in *his* table fellowship.

Because it's at the table where those we have seen as "other" become *humanized* to us. And it's at the table where strangers can become—*friends*.

As author Len Sweet writes, "At the table, sitting together, facing each other, talking to each other—good food, good conversation, good laughs, good stories—we learn the good news of the God who eats good food with [so-called] bad people. There is nothing else like it in the world. To bring back the vigor to Christianity, to reverse the church's attrition rate, we must bring back the table."

In the process, the table becomes a place that brings diverse people together. As I said earlier, *nothing brings people together like Jesus' table does*. And so, secondly, we're called to meal-sharing that:

2. We are called to meal-sharing UNITES A DIVERSE CHURCH FAMILY.

I began this message speaking about how much Cornerstone has grown in diversity over the years. As God continues to bring people from all kinds of backgrounds into this church—people of different ages, races, cultures, countries of origin, income levels, abilities and so on—our sharing of meals together—perhaps more than anything else—will serve as a sign that we are one family—*God's* family—reconciled to God and to each other in Jesus.

Len Sweet writes that, "The table is where the diverse body of Christ joins together... The table is a place of intimacy, and those who feast at Jesus' table become family together in a new kind of relationship—one that obliterates dissension, walls, bloodlines, and divisions."

In the book of Acts, and throughout the New Testament, we find that the first Christians ate together to express their family solidarity in Christ. What's interesting is that the church didn't always get this right, because old prejudices and fears die hard. Some were slow to learn. Even the great Apostle Peter stumbled in this regard. In Galatians 2, the Apostle Paul writes:

But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish Christians followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.⁹

⁹ Galatians 2:11-13 (NLT)

I love how real the Bible is. Here are these two great men of God—Peter and Paul—and Paul says that on this occasion, he felt obliged to oppose Peter to his face. Why?

Because Peter, out of fear of what certain Jewish Christians might say, would no longer eat with Gentile (or non-Jewish) Christians. Peter was eating in a way that served to divide rather than unite God's family. Peter was eating in a way that was separating siblings in Christ rather than bringing them together.

Later in the same letter, Galatians, Paul would go on to write that:

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

If that's true—if all Christians are indeed one in Christ—then it is vital for us to live out that unity, day to day. The integrity of our mission as a local church depends on our unity as a congregation—all the more so given how diverse we're becoming.

To outsiders, one of the most convincing proofs of the transforming love, grace and power of Jesus is a congregation with people from all different backgrounds loving, caring for, and serving each other as they live in Christian unity. Indeed, another one of our Core Values as a church is Unity-in-Diversity:

Unity-in-Diversity: We celebrate each person's uniqueness, while eagerly pursuing loving, harmonious relationships with each other.

And one of the most practical and powerful means God gives us for strengthening our unity as a church is meal-sharing.

One writer says that, "It's not just a cultural coincidence that throughout the ages, all over the world, people gather together at a meal in order to get to know one another... As we sit together, we don't just pass food around; fellow diners pass bits of themselves back and forth as well, exchanging tales as well as condiments."

Our text in Acts says the first believers "*ate together with glad and sincere hearts*" (2:46 NIV), which means they were open-hearted with each other; there was no pretense in the way they behaved—they could be themselves with each other, joyfully so.

Since the NBA season started this past week, I thought a basketball illustration would be in order today.

¹⁰ Galatians 3:28 (NLT)

Two of basketball's greatest legends are Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Larry Bird. The two were bitter rivals, and their personal dislike of each other was intense. Somewhere along the way, Converse paid the two to shoot a commercial together.

Bird had insisted that they shoot the commercial at his family farm in Indiana. The shoot began icily, the superstars eyeing each other suspiciously. When they broke for lunch, the two were about to go their separate ways, when Bird's mother announced that she had made lunch, and invited everyone to the table. This is what Larry Bird said about that lunch:

It was at the table that I discovered Earvin Johnson. I never liked Magic Johnson very much. But Earvin I like, a lot. And Earvin didn't come out until I met him at Mom's table.

If that's the power of a mother's table, can you imagine the power of Jesus' table to unite diverse peoples together in his love? *Nothing brings people together like Jesus' table does.*

In their book, *The Other Half of Church*, authors Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks write these compelling words:

Sharing food and drink together raises... joy... in a community. Food was created for us to bond to God and each other. However, we need training... Many of us have a habit of bonding with the food itself... When we bond with the food, we do not build our attachment with others at the table and God who provided the meal. For food to act as a bonding agent, we need good teaching and training in the community. Learning how to use food and drink to build our love for each other should be part of every church's discipleship program.¹¹

This includes meal-sharing in restaurants and coffee shops, in our homes, and small groups. And after a long pandemic pause, we are now we are able to offer Open Table Thursdays once again here at Cornerstone.

OTT— as we call it for short— is our community dinner, which happens twice a month. Would you come to OTT, and bring a friend, or bring a neighbor? Would you bring someone who is marginalized perhaps—someone who might never otherwise get a meal invitation?

Come to OTT, and get to know others in this church family, sharing bits of yourselves with each other as you share your food.

¹¹ Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation*, p. 102-103.

Because when we commit to sharing meals together, Jesus, the Lord of the Table, will get into the midst of our table fellowship by his Spirit, and will work in powerful ways to unite us together as a church family, and to draw outsiders to himself.

I have found that attending Open Table Thursday regularly has deepened my own sense of connection with folks in this growing church family. I've gotten to know newcomers better, long-time members better, youth and kids better. It's the informal, unstructured nature of Open Table Thursday that makes it so powerful, so pregnant with kingdom possibility. It's just sitting down and sharing a meal together, and I've really missed it when it was shut down because of the pandemic.

Before I close, I'd like to leave you with this challenge: If it's possible for you, would you consider making attendance at Open Table Thursdays a priority? If not every time it's offered, then at least once a month? You'll be glad you did. Meal service takes place between 5:30 and 7:00 p.m. You can buy your tickets online at: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/opentable.

Just buy your tickets for your whole family on the church website, and come anytime between 5:30 and 7:30. You're not going to regret making space for these shared meals—and not just Open Table Thursdays, but Sunday potlucks as well. In particular, though, I'd love to see our Open Table Thursday attendance keep growing and growing. Because I think God is doing something on Thursday evenings that for all its ordinariness stands out as uncommonly special. *Nothing brings people together like Jesus' table does.*

And here's one more note of good news about the return of opportunities to eat and drink together as a church family. Starting in November, coffee, tea, juice and snacks will be back after Sunday morning worship services! Oh the things Jesus can do when we stand around together with hot beverages and a pack of cookies in hand!

Shall we pray together?