

Sunday December 10, 2017

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

You give but little when you give of your possessions.

It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

— Kahlil Gibran, from *The Prophet*

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting *Family prayer* of Robert Louis Stevenson

Lord, behold our family here assembled.
We thank you for this place in which we dwell,
for the love that unites us,
for the peace accorded us this day,
for the hope with which we expect the morrow;
for the health, the work, the food and the bright skies
that make our lives delightful;
for our friends in all parts of the earth. Amen.

Reading *Red Brocade*, Naomi Shahib Nye

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

Sermon

Cooking Lessons

(c) Sylvia Stocker

There is no overstating what a sad time this is for our congregation. Since mid-November, we have been trying to come to grips with the disappearance and presumed death of Ted Berrett, whose body the searchers believe was washed out to sea. And then Friday morning, the sudden death of Chris Mitchell sent shock waves through our congregation. Chris was feisty, assertive, funny, and smart. Her mind was always engaged, working through the information, thinking creatively. She possessed a healthy dose of skepticism, and she often produced alternative ways of looking at things. She did not suffer fools gladly, and, at the same time, she possessed a heart of gold. In addition, Chris was married to one of the treasures at the heart of our congregation – our *minister emeritus*, Brad, who, as far as I am concerned, is one of the kindest human beings I have ever met. How our hearts ache for Brad and his family. Today we struggle to make sense of all of this and to reckon with the gigantic holes in our torn up, broken hearts. And so today's sermon has taken a radical departure from the one I had been planning up until around lunchtime on Friday.

A few weeks ago, I came across an extraordinary claim in a newspaper article. The article said the cookbook *Jerusalem*, by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, was the cookbook that would bring about world peace. Cooking our way to world peace! Hyperbole for sure. But that claim provided the genesis for today's sermon. Circumstances have provided the substance.

Some of the most ancient, enduring and meaningful religious rituals involve feeding one another: the Jewish sabbath meal, the Muslim feasting to break the fasts during Ramadan, Christian communion, Jewish Passover Seders.

Feed the stranger for three days before asking anything personal. Rice? Pine nuts? Fresh mint in your tea? Hold out your hands with an offering of simple food, then the deeper sharing may develop. Simple, basic hospitality.

But juxtapose over that vision the fact that we live in a world where many people are too busy even to share family meals together and too isolated from one another ever to encounter the hungry stranger. Can we find our way back to the red brocade pillow?

Chris Mitchell was part of a memoir writing group. Her memoir was organized around beloved family recipes. A recipe, a reflection. Many people could produce memories related to family feasting times. Many have treasured recipes, going back to previous generations. In my family, my grandmother's clam pie recipe. In my husband's family, his grandmother's cranberry raisin pie – and an approach to making fish chowder that goes back through many generations of Mainers.

The family recipes I treasure are about much more than the food. Clearly that was so for Chris, too. My

family's clam pie recipe evokes memories of trips to the seaside when I was very small, when the family set out together to dig the clams that went into the pie. Steve's family recipes evoke memories of gathering for meals at the family farm in Westbrook and hearing the stories of flour bought by the barrel so that his grandmother could feed her family of 13 children, husband, mother-in-law, and hired farm hands.

The recipes represent relationships, love, connection. Every human being needs those things for spiritual and emotional sustenance, just as they need food for physical sustenance. In fact, our needs for food, relationship, connection, and love are so strong that some of the complicated feelings many of us have about food can be traced directly back to the crossed wires we may have acquired – thinking the food *itself* is about love, or connection, or relationship. We may overeat, trying to attain some satisfactory, though illusory, degree of such qualities. Or we may feel deprived of love, connection, and relationship if we live in food insecure circumstances. If there isn't enough to share, how does one imprint an image of sharing? Or family meals may have been (or may be) fraught with hurtful fighting, causing our experience of breaking bread together to become mired in anger. Even with those potential, thorny complications, many people still enjoy, best of all, to gather around the table with loved ones – and *share*.

It turns out the cookbook *Jerusalem* is something of a cult cookbook. The book is beautiful to look at, even to touch with its pillowed hard cover. The many photographs taken in Jerusalem markets and kitchens help to put the cuisine in context. The book gives some history along with the cooking instructions. The recipes look good and interesting. (I wouldn't know; I never actually have time to cook.) But I suspect *Jerusalem* has become a cult cookbook at least in part because of the story from which it emerged.

The authors, Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, were both born in Jerusalem in 1968 and raised there. They frequented the same local eateries and ate similar foods in their respective homes as they grew up. But they never knew each other until much later, when they had moved to London and found themselves working at the same restaurant. That's because Ottolenghi is Jewish, and he grew up in the Jewish section of Jerusalem. Tamimi, who is Muslim, grew up in the Arab East side of Jerusalem. Two cultures at odds with each other, at war with each other. Two boys growing up near to each other, yet so far apart. From what I have read, the two authors had to shed some of the baggage of their past to be able to become the friends and collaborators they are today. But now the message comes loud and clear through their recipes: The things that provide common ground are far greater than the things that divide us from one another. Or, at least they could be if we would let them be.

Ottolenghi and Tamimi describe some of the shared qualities of their two cultures: a love of cooking and even a shared palate in many cases; a spirit of warmth, generosity and hospitality. Jerusalem is a place, they say, where

“Going into a friend's restaurant or a friend of a friend, you are never expected to pay. It is a combination of the famous Middle Eastern hospitality that goes back to the days of Abraham and the typical way in which Jews and Arabs shower guests and relatives with delights, lest they 'go home hungry.' Heaven forbid.” (p. 12)

Despite the commonalities of food and culture, deep rifts exist in Jerusalem, as we all know. Ottolenghi and Tamimi tell us,

“Food, at the moment, seems to be the only unifying force in this highly fractured place. The dialogue between Jews and Arabs, and often among Jews themselves, is almost nonexistent. It is sad to note how little daily interaction there is between communities, with people sticking together in closed, homogenous groups. Food, however, seems to break down those boundaries on occasion. You can see people shop together in food markets, or eat in one another's restaurants. On rare occasion, they work together in partnership in food establishments. It takes a giant leap of faith, but we are happy to take it – what have we got to lose? – to image that hummus will eventually bring Jerusalemites together, if nothing else will. (pp. 12-13)

It's hard to know, in a world that seems so deeply divided, what could possibly bring us together. It may as well be hummus. But I wonder if, perhaps, there is some metaphorical food that can help us find common ground as well. What is feeding one another but sharing and providing at the most basic and fundamental of human needs? How do we help one another meet those basic needs?

Two years ago, Steve and I attended the World Parliament of Religions in Salt Lake City. The Parliament's purpose was and is to celebrate the places where diverse humans find common ground and to act, in concert, to heal our world. I felt thrilled to be in the presence of diverse seekers from all over the world – people focused on our commonalities rather than our particularities.

One of the activities I loved most was the “free lunch” the Sikh community offered every day for the entire Parliament – a population of around 9,000 people. Apparently their lunchtime offering is a tradition at all World Parliament of Religions, just as hospitality itself is a tradition in the Sikh religion. They have their hospitality down to a science. A line snaked down the hallway of the convention center, as we waited for a spot in the large conference room set up for the purpose. Once inside, we removed our shoes, and we donned head coverings. Our hosts then ushered us into long rows of people sitting on the floor. (There were a few tables provided for those who couldn't sit on the floor.) Carrying large silver pails, the servers walked up and down the rows spooning out delicious vegetarian food – rice, curried chick peas, raita, saag paneer, poori.

Sikhs believe the guest is God's representative. Providing hospitality increases and deepens human bonds and promotes love and kindness. Each kind act multiplies, bringing more kindness into the world. (<https://www.allaboutsikhs.com/punjab/punjab-culture-hospitality>) There may be something to that. I sat on the floor of the convention center, plate of delicious free food in hand, and looked around me. People of every description stretched out in all directions, all of us joined in the simple act of sharing a meal together.

There is something powerful about covering one's head in the presence of the holy – an act of profound humility – and then *receiving* such open-hearted generosity at the hands of complete strangers. And there is something powerful when sharing a meal reaches across national, religious, gender, cultural, and ethnic differences, drawing people together in the simple act of eating. I felt the presence of something profound there – the presence of the Most High, the grace of God.

Now, in a smaller but equally important effort, our congregation is organizing meals for the Mitchell family. That simple act of sharing and caring is something human beings have been doing ever since they formed themselves into tribes. Food for the body in this case is food for the soul as well. By giving we recognize that all of us hunger and thirst. Our bodies hunger for food and thirst for water. Our hearts hunger and thirst for the people we love and long for when the shock of grieving strikes its blow against us. Hands and hearts reaching out in simple, yet profound, connection.

I don't know if hummus will bring Jerusalem together. I doubt a cookbook can usher in such monumental change. But hands reached out in human connection? Hearts recognizing the common humanity we share? Perhaps those are simple things that can change our world.

Benediction

Father John. B. Guiliani:

Bless our hearts
to hear in the breaking of bread
the song of the universe.