

Love, Pray, Eatⁱ

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
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Luke 8:1-3 (Jesus, the twelve, a group of women, and Jesus' family journey together.)

After four people offered to loan me the book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert, I figured I should read it. This book is a reflective memoir of a year in the life of a newly divorced woman who was seeking healing, balance, and spiritual insight while also writing this book. During a year of travel, the main character, played by Julia Roberts in the recent film, explores Italy, where she eats, travels to India, where she prays, and finally journeys to Bali, where she regains her ability to love. John and I saw the movie, and I agree with the *New Yorker* movie reviewer [David Denby] when he finishes his review with this question: "When (Julia) Roberts hesitates, (about joining with the one who loves her, actor Javier Bardem) and asks her guru [in Bali] if she won't lose her precious balance by giving in to love, half the women in the audience will probably say, 'Girl, are you crazy?'"

How many of you have either read the book or seen the movie?

Planning sermons for this fall, I realized that at Thanksgiving time our spiritual journeys often occur in reverse order. Love comes first; love brings us together. We gather together with loved ones, or we *think* of those whom we love, if we cannot be with them. *Love comes first.*

We may give little thought to whom we are eating with for the other 1094 meals of the year, but this Thursday, for Americans, it will matter. Sometimes we gather together with extended families, over long distances. Other times we find ways to take care of ourselves lovingly, alone or with friends. Or, we enjoy inviting people to dinner whom we don't usually eat with, people who might be new to the area or in a different circumstance.

When we had just moved to Ohio, a colleague invited us over; I recall carrying a Shoe-fly pie very carefully for two blocks on a thin layer of icy snow. We felt welcomed to Ohio Thanksgivings. I recall my first Thanksgiving away from my family, at 24, when I was in Iowa. 4 families who were ex-pats from California asked me to join in their Mexican-food celebration. Half a dozen years ago, when John and I were somewhat tender about our family, I had a heart-to-heart talk with my sister, who was hosting her huge extended family gathering. I needed to convey that we needed to have more solitude. John and I had a meaningful Thanksgiving with a turkey sandwich for lunch, hiking around Joshua Tree. That year taught me that it's important to be honest with extended family and to talk through feelings and needs, with respect for all—and that all that is not easy.

It is love that leads Kris Kattus to provide what promises to be an amazing meal here at this church for whoever wants to join in. Yet, for many, much of the time it's "Over the river and through the woods to grandmothers' house we go"... or "Tomorrow's thanksgiving, now listen my dear, Grandma is coming and Grandpa and Ned... They'll be hungry as bears by the time they get here"

With **Love** for family, for friends, and for self, we give a lot of thought to relationships on Thanksgiving Day—with people near and far.

I imagine a whole lot of love when I read the little introductory passage of the Gospel of Luke 8:1-3. It's not a familiar passage, for it is often skipped over as we hurry to get to the famous parable of the sower and the seeds. But look at this little vignette of friends, family, church friends journeying in love.

Image this scene: Jesus and “the twelve,” along with his family and some women who had been healed and other women who had sufficient means to provide for them all journey through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. This itinerant ministry was remarkable in so many ways. Think about what an *unusual combination* of males and females this is. What a wonderful set of fore parents in faith they all were for us! Jesus' followers resisted so many of the ancient Palestinian gender rules. One of the nice quotes in *Eat, Pray, Love* is this, “Flexibility is just as essential for divinity as is discipline.” (p.206)

This diverse group of Jesus' family and followers were not headed toward a Thanksgiving feast, American style, but this scene somehow inspires me to lift up the goodness of the unusual—mixtures of people together in love, with great intent and in celebrations that bind us together. It's worth the effort!

Love brings us together. Then, whether or not we ever pray as a family before meals throughout the entire year, grace will often be given. The amazing moment, sometimes awkward, sometimes spontaneous, often well-planned, even rehearsed, will come when we pray. Who will say grace? When? What if all are not here yet? Shall we wait? Our prayers are carefully worded yearnings to express our deepest of gratitude—a gratitude that, shared by a kid or an elder, will never manage to say it all, because “all” is so big. There is so much to be grateful for.

We Love. We Pray. Then, after all the journeys inspired by love and the prayer inspired by gratitude—we eat! Love, Pray, Eat.

2-5,000 years ago, as our Bible was being compiled, the people loved, prayed, and ate, but of course they did not celebrate Thanksgiving; they were not Americans recalling the Pilgrims' and the Native Americans' harvests.

So, there is of course nothing about American Thanksgiving in our Bible. I checked many of the recommended scriptures for Thanksgiving, those listed in what we call the “lectionary,” and found, not surprisingly, texts from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament in which there are expressions of gratitude or admonitions to give thanks.

Gratitude is exceedingly sacred. It touches us at every level of our being—Spirit, mind, body, emotions, relationships.

For some reason, I don't find myself drawn to explore the gratitude passages in the Bible. Instead, I find myself wanting to lift up some of the **gatherings of people in our Bible, as they eat together—to see ourselves mirrored in them, humbly, humorously, and faithfully.**

This mirroring of the Biblical personalities eating together will evoke some empathy from us. Or, perhaps we'll feel as if they, those ancient people, are empathizing with us!

I searched for sort of ordinary meals, or big celebrations, parallel to our Thanksgiving. Then I began almost to laugh. Do you remember your ordinary meals,

even your ordinary Thanksgivings? Not too much. We remember, and the Bible records the idiosyncratic holiday gatherings, often the tender ones.

Okay, there is nothing too special about the meal with Jesus, Martha and Mary. Right? Well, maybe that one is too ordinary. Mary does a lot of the preparation. When Jesus arrives, Martha watches football on TV with Jesus. Oops, no, Mary talks about important things with Jesus. Then there's a bit of understandable frustration. Who should do what? What's most important? The whole day seems important; things are to be just right. Yet, when things are to be so perfect, there easily can be a little tension between loved ones as all sort out the responsibilities. If there should be any resentment, any little bickering next Thursday... let's think of Jesus, Mary, and Martha, and feel loved and loving.

A famous biblical feast finds Jesus himself helping out when there are not enough provisions—in that ancient case, of wine. Recall that Jesus' mother beseeched him to help out, to do what he can? She wanted everything to be good, and there was a mistake, not enough to drink. If, during our holiday, here in Weeks' Hall, in Tim-buck-too, or at your home, something goes wrong, the gravy burns, the side dish is located after everyone has gone home, or even the wrong football team wins—let's think of that Cana Wedding... and laugh at ourselves... Jesus may not be present to make new gravy, but the Spirit of Love can indeed let us not be down on ourselves, or our team.

There is an interesting thought in *Eat, Pray, Love* that is applicable here: "I took a new idea with me: compassion. I asked my heart if it could please infuse my soul with a more generous perspective on my mind's workings. Instead of thinking that I was a failure, could I perhaps accept that I am only a human being—and a normal one, at that?"(p.157)

In addition to the actual meals between biblical persons, there are meals told in Jesus' parables, too, which are very realistic. A son has been away a long time; the family has been worried. On a very special day, the child journeys home and is welcomed with open arms. Lots and lots of prayers of gratitude to God are shouted, and they eat. In fact, they feast. If we have loved ones about whom we are very worried, loved ones who are in difficulty, may we know that God's arms are open so wide to them, wherever they are. And, if they return, or if it's we who returns, may God's love abound. How could it not?

Of course there are biblical meals in which people wonder why so-and-so was invited. For Jesus' time people wondered why he ate with Pharisees. For us, it may be our great uncle, or the one hardly any of the family even knows, or the sticky-fingered kids. Jesus pointed out the logic of the illogical invitation. He said that those who are whole do not need a physician, seeming to mean that the healing presence of his was a gift to the "Pharisee." Jesus' logic included quite a bit of love. May we, this year, use the logic of love.

I think of two other significant meals in the Bible. One, we call the "last supper," but of course it was not the "last." There will be some meals this Thanksgiving which are a kind of last in one way or another. The last before someone marries; the last before someone moves; the last before a baby will be born; and the last before someone will die. May we find even in these meals a mirroring of our biblical friends. May we be honest and may we say what needs to be said. May we enjoy the moment and may we take not only photographs, but internal pictures to remember the love.

The last meal I'm thinking of that some of our Thanksgiving gatherings might mirror is the one Jesus' friends were having when, after Jesus had died, lo and behold, he showed up! His friends experienced his presence. May we mirror in our gatherings a connectedness with the presence of loved ones in eternity—great grandpa's poem, great grandma's Waldorf salad.

Love brings us together; we prayer, and we eat. Aren't we of one-kind over the centuries as we journey for love, as we pray in all sorts of different ways, (but mostly from very grateful hearts) and as we eat... with odd ones, with people who have returned after a long absence, with a few fusses about who does what, with some things that will go wrong, with a few seemingly miracles, and with some "lasts" and some "family firsts"?

Whether we're on a year-long intentional spiritual journey or simply participating in another year's thanksgiving, may we be grateful, deeply grateful.

At the Pastoral Prayer Time:

In I Timothy 2:1-3, Paul urges Timothy to pray, and of courses Paul is very accustomed to pray. He uses lots of fancy words for different kinds of prayer. Paul suggests supplication and intercessions. He also recommends that prayers of thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity...

In the memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, the author begins praying after having not prayed for maybe years. She writes, "What I said to God through my gasping sobs was something like this: 'Hello, God. How are you? I'm Liz. It's nice to meet you.' ... In fact, it was all I could do to stop myself from saying, 'I've always been a big fan of your work. . .' 'I'm sorry to bother you so late at night...' God waited me out. I pulled myself together enough to go on: 'I am not an expert at praying, as you know. But can you please help me? I am in desperate need of help. I don't know what to do. I need an answer. Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do. Please tell me what to do. . .'"p.15

A while later, after she's explored quite a bit of prayer and has listened to someone who is hurting, this author writes, "Your tears are my prayers."

We will say aloud events, things for which we're grateful.
Smiling prayer...

ⁱ Prayer time: PRAY: I Timothy 2:1-3 (Paul suggests ways to pray and to pray for all.)