



WEEK 2: GIFTS OF HOSPITALITY

One of my good friends is a “foodie” and his youngest son is a chef, who runs a cafe. Together they cook up a storm. Many times I have been the recipient of my friend’s fine meals. Some years ago, on the occasion of his 50th birthday, Phil invited a group of his closest friends and family to a sumptuous banquet, prepared, cooked and served by himself and Luke his son. Imagine that: to celebrate his birthday, Phil likes nothing better than being host, chef, waiter and dishwasher to those he loves the most!

When Phil cooks me something, he is always eager to hear my response. While I appreciate good food, I don’t have the acquired sensitivities that allow me to fully absorb the crafted meal set before me, but I *do* know a great deal of care and skill has gone into its making.

Of course, Phil is not looking to me for expert opining about the intricacies of his creations. Neither is his keenness to know how the food has been received based on a desperate desire for affirmation – or gratitude. Instead, it seems to me that having blessed me (and others) with his culinary creations, he is eager for me to taste and appreciate the same delight and joy he does.

Put simply: he delights in expressing love and care for others through cooking.

Phil pastors a small congregation that unsurprisingly is known for its hospitality and communal meals. In fact, a mutual friend of ours calls them the “gastro church”! It’s an apt description. The emphasis on food is very intentional. They recognize that community is built around the table, gathering together around a meal is eucharistic (giving thanks to God), and a key part of their mission is through hospitality.

Food is made to be shared. Or to put it another way, the building of relationship and community is a key element of eating. It is not meant to be a solo experience. Sadly, in many countries, eating alone is now the norm. For example, in the US, the average number of meals per week people share with others is three – and they last just twenty minutes each. If, as Sidney Mintz, professor of anthropology at Johns Hopkins University asserts, “Interaction over food is the single most important feature of socializing”, then we are in deep trouble.

It is significant that three of the four most defining eating experiences in the Bible are communal meals – the Passover, the Last Supper (leading to the Eucharist) and the still-to-come Feast of the Lamb. Interestingly, only the eating of the fruit in Genesis 3

is a little less than a shared meal. And a great deal of the recorded life of Jesus seems to be around meals with others.

All cultures intuitively recognize that food and community should go hand-in-hand. “The Meal” is a universal (or supra-cultural) phenomenon. Eating together has a prized place in every ethnic and cultural group. Think Italian, Mexican, Jewish, Maori, Turkish, Moroccan, Thai or Japanese. Not only are there distinctive foods and tastes developed by each of these ethnicities, there are also important rituals around the preparation, presentation and consumption of food.

As Australian chef, pastor and theologian Simon Holt so eloquently puts it:

Eating expresses our common humanity. Food is what brings us together and holds us there. There is barely a relational aspect of life that is not formalized, ritualized, celebrated or facilitated by the acts of eating and drinking. The truth is, food is the great leveler; it is our common need and is made to share.

Which explains why both Jesus and Paul were very tough on people who used the meal table as a means of establishing status and control over others, or of reinforcing already existing economic and social divisions. Simon the Pharisee tried that game on Jesus when he hosted him for a meal, intentionally snubbing Jesus by not following the usual etiquette. Jesus graciously but firmly contrasted Simon’s behavior with that of the woman of bad character who lavished care on him. Paul too, had little time for the status games that some of the more wealthy members of the church in Corinth were playing. For him, they completely betrayed the very meaning of the Eucharist.

In spite of our tendency to allow the meal table to exclude those we don’t like or value, or to undermine relationships, God’s intention is for eating together to be a time of deep community and sharing, when relationships are enriched and strengthened.

Discuss

- Share one thing that impacts you from this reflection.
- What is it about eating together that makes it (as Simon Holt suggests), the “great leveler”?
- Make a quick list of as many meals, stories involving food, or sayings about food as you can recall from the Bible.

Questions specific to those in the hospitality industry

- Given the priority the Bible places on meals and eating together, what impetus might this give for you in your role as a host/cook/waiter/waitress? And in what ways can you see potential to work with God?
- What have you observed (both positively and/or negatively) regarding how hospitality workers have been treated by guests/customers? What attitudes are most common? And what about your own experience?

Luke 10:38-42 Martha and Mary

Read through this passage twice, pausing at the end of each read for silent reflection.

Setting the scene

Here’s a well-known gospel story about hospitality. The traditional interpretation of this story goes something like this: Martha chose the active life, Mary the contemplative; Jesus is affirming Mary’s choice to spend time with Jesus rather than fill her day with work.

However, Bishop Tom Wright argues that, *“The real problem between Martha and Mary wasn’t the workload that Martha had in the kitchen...(it was) that Mary was behaving as if she was a man.”* What does he mean? Well, in Jewish culture the kitchen was the domain of the women, while the living area was the arena for men.

Jesus is affirming Mary’s desire to learn from him (and by implication, to aspire to teach). And by doing so he is challenging the very social mores of his culture.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that both Martha and Mary were seeking to be, in their own way, hospitable to Jesus. Martha was working to prepare a really special meal for Jesus and his disciples. This was a way of honoring him. After all, this is what all hospitable Jewish women were meant to do. And yet her sister, Mary, was not helping where she “should” – leaving Martha all stressed, hot, and bothered!

Instead, Mary was being attentive to their guest in another way. Her hunger to follow and learn from Jesus (while no doubt shocking to the men who were present) was an appropriate way of making room for the Master.

Discuss

- Who do you identify with most? Martha or Mary? Why?
- In *The Message*, verse 41 has Jesus saying, *“Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing.”* Can you recall a time when you have stressed so much about getting the food on the table for guests that you’ve missed the opportunity to spend time with them?
- Table hospitality is about food. But it’s about so much more. What are some things we can do to help ensure that we give time to both the practical and the relational elements of being hospitable?
- Think about an experience where you have been offered hospitality by way of a meal or bed, from someone you didn’t know well. What do you think contributed most to you feeling welcome and relaxed? Or alternatively, what contributed to you feeling in the way and on edge?

Question specific to those in the hospitality industry

- What way/s have you found most effective in helping your guests to feel welcome and at ease? Do you view this as part of your role?

Many gifts of hospitality

Helping people to feel welcome is at the heart of hospitality. But there are many ways of doing this, and they don’t always involve food. Following Jesus is learning to be hospitable – as individuals, and in our workplaces. We don’t all have to be good cooks to do so!

“It is impossible to overstate the significance of paying attention, listening to people’s stories, and taking time to talk with them.” Christine Pohl

Discuss

- Have you ever been the recipient of particularly generous hospitality in your workplace? If so, what made it so special?
- What are some of the reasons why we might feel awkward or apprehensive about taking the initiative with a new colleague or a visitor, and inviting them to have coffee or a meal?
- Share ways in which you seek to make people welcome in your work.
- What helps you to feel welcome when you are in an unfamiliar situation?
- Share any observations you had from the Challenge for the Week.
- How often do your work colleagues eat together (or even have coffee)? What are some of the reasons you think this happens so much – or so little? What difference do you think it would make if this happened more often? How could this change?

Prayer

Challenge for the Week!

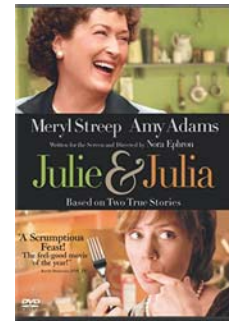
Okay. Last week was a taster. Now for something a little more challenging! This week, try inviting a workmate out for coffee or lunch. If you can, ask folk you don't know very well. If this seems imposing, do it with someone else in your group. Before you do, think carefully about what might put them at ease.

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

Julie & Julia (2009) 100 minutes

Summary: This movie contrasts the life of American chef and TV personality Julia Child (played by Meryl Streep) in the early years of her culinary career, with a young writer from New York, Julie Powell (played by Amy Adams), who decides to cook all 524 recipes from Child's cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961), over a single year, and write about it in a blog.

The film explores a number of themes around identity, calling, relationships, hospitality, and the role of food in our lives.



- Share your impressions of the movie. What impacted you most? What intrigued you? What moved you?
- Julie recognizes the comfort and stability that food can bring to our lives. In what ways might this be good and in what ways might it be bad?
- When Julia's husband asks her what she *really* likes to do, Julia flippantly replies, "Eat!" To which Paul replies, "And you're sooo good at it!" This sets in motion Julia's journey into cooking. What do you think it is that makes Julia such a great cook and hostess?
- Simon Holt writes: "Eating expresses our common humanity...The truth is, food is the great leveler: it is our common need and is made to share." In what ways do you think this is true? How does this display itself in this movie?
- Share about the role of food and eating with others, in your life.
- If you're working in the hospitality industry, what lessons/principles does this movie underline?

Read Luke 10:38-42 (the story of Martha and Mary)

- Who do you identify with most? Martha or Mary? Why?
- In *The Message*, verse 41 has Jesus saying, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing." Can you recall a time when you have stressed so much about getting the food on the table for guests that you've missed the opportunity to spend time with them?
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