

VIEW FROM THE HEIGHTS June 2023

*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”
Hebrews 13:2 NRSV*

Greetings,
“Eating is more intimate than sex!”

The Rev. Professor Peter Gomes once brought a congregation to attention with this shock insight into the Zacchaeus story. He explained that the impact of dining with Jesus would have been far greater – far more intimate – than listening to him teach or witnessing him heal.

Peter Gomes, ABC/USA pastor and preacher extraordinaire, was the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church. He was my pastor, my preaching professor, and my ministry mentor. I miss him deeply.

Peter’s Christian faith informed every aspect of his life – especially his public speaking. Like Jesus, he didn’t hesitate to surprise or shock if it could get an important point across. Hence the “intimacy of eating” line! It was designed to make his Harvard congregation “listen up” (another “Peter-ism”). It also guaranteed that none of us would forget the tale of the height-challenged tax collector.

Peter’s words were startling but absolutely correct. Have you ever tried to eat with someone who intimidates you? Or have just had a flaming row with? The food sits in your stomach like reinforced concrete. (Too much sympathetic nervous activity, too little parasympathetic.) Enjoying a shared meal is indicative of a relationship that is non-threatening - at the very least.

This is why peace treaties conclude with a banquet. They are symbols of new, pacific relationships. Ancient animal sacrifices and the Christian communion service arose from a similar understanding: eating with God (the gods) secures – or signifies - peace between humans and the Divine. Every time we share communion, we are committing ourselves to peace with God and with every person and part of God’s Creation.

Jesus made meals a focus of his ministry. He organized them, catered them, and delighted in those hosted by his friends. The more diverse the guest list the better, as far as Jesus was concerned. In fact, New Testament scholars identify Jesus’ table fellowship as a primary cause of his arrest and execution. Jesus was killed because he refused to practice dietary apartheid.

The importance of food as a bridge across cultural divides struck me anew this week, as I tucked into a delicious meal at a local Iranian restaurant. The dinner was wonderful and the lovely Iranian woman who guided us through the menu was the perfect host. Her kindness and grace put to shame commonly held beliefs about her nation.

Meal sharing is a simple and sweet way of getting to know men and women from other countries, cultures, and classes. Jesus, of course, thought of this 2000 years before me! And he made sure it happened! His cross-cultural dining practices brought together rich and poor, the high-status and the marginalized. Dinners even included women and those with health challenges!

Today, Jesus might organize multicultural meals to address our fear of foreigners or relieve unease about immigration. Maybe, he is waiting for us to carry on this ministry...

Wishing you a summer filled with ethnic epicurean adventures!

Deepest blessings,

Brenda