

# To the Table

*A Spirituality of Food, Farming,  
and Community*



Lisa Graham McMinn



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Brandon Buerkle created the illustrations in this book.

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To God's web of life that feeds us all—  
I bow my head in awe and gratitude

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## *Acknowledgments*

Tell me a story and I will care more. Maybe it's a personal weakness, but I find it to be true. If you give me someone that I can see, then I can imagine that someone as a family member or a friend or neighbor. Since I'm not unique on this point, I asked several people to let me poke into their lives so I could include their stories. Thank you Kim, Sarah, Brandon, Michael, and Brenda for your willingness to entrust me with your stories and thoughts about how you feed your families and bake bread and pastries for your community.

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# Introduction

*Coming Back to the Kitchen*



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Food is nothing less than Sacrament.  
—Leslie Leyland Fields<sup>1</sup>

Every December of my childhood, three sugary treats showed up during the holidays: Sandies (also known as Russian Tea Cakes—an absolute favorite), Divinity (a supersweet candy popular in the 1960s and 1970s that I did not like *at all*), and Hello Dollies (which I liked rather too much). These cookies, candies, and bars were as much a part of our holiday tradition as Dad placing tinsel on the tree, strand by strand, politely insisting that our help was not needed. My recipe for Sandies is typed on an index card and stored, along with other relics, in a green plastic box I acquired in a high school home economics class. I preserved this particular recipe with a plastic sheath made for such purposes, but still it's blotched with bits of butter that seeped onto the card before I decided to preserve it.

• *Sandies* •

- 1 c. softened butter
- 2 tsp. water
- ½ c. sugar
- 2 tsp. vanilla
- 2 c. sifted flour
- 1 c. chopped hazelnuts (or pecans)
- 1 c. powdered sugar



Cream butter and sugar. Add water and vanilla and mix well. Blend in the flour and nuts, cover, and chill for at least four hours. Preheat oven to 325 degrees.

Roll dough into 1-inch balls and bake on an ungreased baking sheet for about 20 minutes. Cookies should not brown, except perhaps on the bottom. Transfer to cooling racks and cool completely. Roll in powdered sugar to coat. Cookies will stay fresh for 2–3 days in an airtight container, and they freeze well.

At some point during high school (probably for that home economics class), I typed out recipes on cards. No doubt I was thinking of my hope chest, which is not only an antiquated idea these days but perhaps a bit offensive as well. On my Sandies recipe the typed word *filbert*, which is what we called hazelnuts back then, drifts up, letter by letter, toward the word *pecans* above it. While this may be a quirk of the manual typewriter, the word drifts with emphasis, an assertion that filbert ought to be the nut of choice, rather than pecan.

Auden and Juniper, both five years old, have helped me in the kitchen for several years already. They drag the black chair from the dining room so they can stand counter-high and pour, stir, and lick. When they started helping, mostly (if it was allowed) they licked.

A few years ago, while three-year-old Auden waited for me to come to her house to pick her up for our Sandies baking date, her mom overheard her talking to herself saying, “It is so *unexpected* that I get to bake with Grammy today!” As her mother tells the story, Auden was speaking with much enthusiasm, as though she’d not been to my house already on countless occasions to bake. Still, it made me smile. After rolling the balls and putting them in the oven, we sat down for our traditional mocha/hot chocolate break. She wanted to do “cheers” by smashing our mugs together, which we do often enough, but because I had pulled out the fancy tea set, I taught her how to do pinky cheers with our little fingers instead. We started calling each other “Madam,” and I taught her to drink with one pinky in the air, which was dangerous in terms of spilling hot chocolate, which she did. At any rate, she told me I was a “cool girl.” I haven’t been called that in a long while.

*To the Table* is about getting people together in the kitchen and around tables—children and old folks, men and women, friends and family. It’s about dusting off ideas about food that haven’t been examined for a while and taking a good look at them. I invite readers to remember what they have loved about food and have thought about farmers; I urge them to rethink the word *drudgery*, as in “cooking is drudgery.” Together, we will

look at food from all sorts of angles, including those that take our gaze inward, outward, and upward.

If that sounds like too much attention on too insignificant a part of life, let me say up front that I thought the same at an earlier stage in my life. But I am reminded of the importance of food when I go hiking and pack too little food for too long a day. Or when, on rare occasion, I pass on breakfast and lunch and dinner. A spring day loses its brilliance; my husband, Mark, becomes annoying; and even coworkers and friends become less, well, wonderful. If I go too long without food, I stop thinking clearly, and I don't have the energy to fulfill obligations or to pursue what brings me joy. If I continued in this manner, I'd eventually stop being altogether.

Every human activity accomplished in a day gets accomplished because people consume food. Eggs and pancakes, grilled cheese, tomato soup and apples, fish, asparagus, and baby red potatoes keep bodies warm, hearts pumping, and brains sending messages this way and that.

For many years, the growing, harvesting, transporting, and processing of food remained on the periphery of my consciousness, comfortably just outside my awareness. I ate tomatoes and strawberries in January and bought the occasional hamburger and french fries at fast-food restaurants, unaware of the steps it took to get food from field to mouth. I started hearing about and reading that some ways of assuaging my appetite came at a more significant cost than I knew—not only to my body but also to my soul, our family's well-being, and the health of local and global communities.

Wendell Berry calls eating an agricultural act, by which he means that the choices we make reinforce the processes, for good or ill, that get food to our tables. In *Food and Faith*, theologian Norman Wirzba talks of eating as deeply spiritual and offers a thoughtful theology of food. Eating, he says, has the power to remind us daily of God's provisioning, a very earthy grace. Eating can call forth a reverence for God's creation and awareness of the processes that get food from seed to table. I no longer doubt that our relationship to food shapes how we understand ourselves, God, and our place in the world.

Over the last decade I started hungering for *good* food. This hopeful hunger is spiritual; choices I make about eating affect not only my soul but also my local and global neighbors.

So yes, food and faith are deeply intertwined. It ought not be surprising. After all, God appears throughout Scripture when people gather to eat. God causes food to grow, feeds the hungry, satisfies the thirsty, and establishes days for feasting—all reasons to celebrate God’s goodness and faithfulness.

Mark and I said grace with our children mostly out of habit. Now they are grown and we still say grace. While habit is still involved, so is a growing awareness of some larger grace that is poured out on all creation. In our best moments we pause in gratitude before eating, recognizing food as God’s sustaining grace and remembering our utter dependence on something outside of ourselves for our existence. Eating is a humble reminder that we are not, after all, autonomous beings; we are interdependent ones.

Grace offered at the end of the day as we sit at a table of food connects food to faith. What changes when we couple a spiritual discipline of gratitude with this basic rhythm of daily eating? Maybe we learn to better use moments connected to food to see God’s bountiful love and grace and to respond in ways that move us inwardly, outwardly, and upwardly toward compassion and gratitude.

*To the Table* crafts space to allow God’s spirit to move us toward celebration, gratitude, and compassion. By connecting values of love, hospitality, and justice to everyday choices at the grocery store and around our tables, we live out attentive gratitude. In the pages that follow I’ll travel the path food takes, starting with food on the table and working backward to seeds in the hand.

I’m learning to eat well through conversations about food ethics and by embracing old food traditions. Most importantly, I’m stepping back into the kitchen and looking for good things to happen. When I invite others to join me there, we become creators of good food; we eat with intention and foster community at the table.

Michael Pollan suggests that growing, preparing, preserving, and eating food is one of the most worthwhile of human activities. Maybe communion with God happens as much through stocking our pantries with good and just food and by inviting others to our tables as it does in ascending the mountaintop or meeting God in the desert or at a retreat center.

After reading a draft of the introduction, my friend Ada wrote in the margin, “What Auden delightfully expressed in being *unexpected* probably

carries out through the ‘eating good’ journey. Unexpected is exactly where I find myself in relationship to a good God. I am astonished at God’s provision through food and eating; it’s quite radical, and I don’t know how to live it out on a daily basis.”

*To the Table* is a journey both ordinary and full of the unexpected. This is a book of hope for a new generation responsible for feeding themselves and their families; it’s also for those who have spent countless hours, satisfying or not, in kitchens. It is a book of hope for things longed for—for the very real spiritual and physical well-being that comes from living intentionally as we engage the daily tasks, challenges, and joys of eating.

## Reflections and Questions

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1. What was a favorite childhood food, and what memories do you associate with it? Taking this a step further, what would you need to make that food this week? Perhaps you need to track down the recipe, buy some ingredients, borrow a kitchen tool, or call a parent, sibling, aunt, uncle, or grandparent. If you share this food with friends or family, consider recounting to them an “I remember this . . .” story from your childhood.
2. What kinds of feelings do you have toward food-making? Below is a list of possibilities. Reflect and perhaps journal or talk in a group about when and why you feel as you do. What makes your feelings change from one day or situation to the next? How have your overall feelings about cooking changed in the last year, five years, or ten?

Fear of failure	Enthusiasm
Being overwhelmed	Curiosity
Comfortable routine	Boredom
Dread	Drudgery
Excitement	Joy

3. This chapter describes a hopeful hunger for good food: “This hopeful hunger is spiritual; choices I make about eating affect not only my soul but also my local and global neighbors.” Is this a new idea

for you? If so, can you see yourself embracing it as you delve into the book? If it is not new for you, how do you resonate with this statement?

4. What prompted you to read this book? How are you hoping to be changed and to think differently about food by the end?

1

# The Common Table



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Eating . . . is an invitation to enter into communion and be reconciled with each other. To eat with God at the table is to eat with the aim of healing and celebrating the memberships of creation.

—Norman Wirzba<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, our first year back in Newberg, Oregon, after living thirteen years in the Midwest, we built ourselves a house. Mark’s mom and stepdad, Donna and Bob, invited us to stay with them so that we could put money toward building a house rather than spending that money on rent. Besides engaging our teaching responsibilities at George Fox University, we (but mostly Mark) spent spare minutes laying floors, doing electrical work, coordinating subcontractors, and building staircases and porches. Nearly every night Mom cooked dinner, insisting that this was her contribution to helping with the house. I say “nearly” because when I could manage it, I cooked Thursday nights, partly because I missed stirring things around in a pot and partly because it seemed right and good to cook our family dinner on a day I had some extra time. On Friday nights Mark and I would often go on a dinner date, usually combined with yet another trip to Home Depot, where we wrestled with choosing light fixtures, water fixtures, and doorknobs. But Mom would have cooked for us seven nights a week if we’d let her.

Around their common table we came to know Bob in ways we hadn’t before, and he came to know us. His wry sense of humor made me grimace as much as laugh and reminded me of generational and cultural differences that nevertheless linked us. He had subtle ways of finding out what needed doing and then showing up with the tools to do it. He bestowed gifts like Santa year-round, treasures made or found at Goodwill and then refashioned—like the clothespin basket he made for me after I admired his.

Mom's invitation to her dinner table night after night for a year made room for a friendship to blossom between us and her husband, and our relationship with her plumbed new depths. Maybe witnessing such gracious hospitality got me itching to do more of it myself. Or maybe a deeper truth was ignited: I experienced what God intended eating to accomplish, that is, a grace-filled nourishing that helps us recognize our responsibility for each other's well-being.

We'd never celebrated an equinox before, but since I was itching to be hospitable and since I'd spent a lot of time outdoors that first year back, it was a natural place to begin. When Mark was laying ABS (acrylonitrile butadiene styrene) pipe for downspouts and dealing with vapor barrier and whatnot in the early stages of building, I was hauling bricks, tires, and bottles out of the creek, forging a more certain trail through the woods along the deer path, and pulling up invasive Canadian Thistle, also known as "lettuce from hell." (I am not joking; Canadian Thistle is related to lettuce and is often called by that name.) I noted subtle seasonal changes in Oregon foliage that I'd missed during our thirteen years in the Midwest. I had time to pay attention, which inclined me to stand still and take note. Celebrating the equinox that first fall back in Oregon gave me a chance to share my enthusiasm about all the attention I'd been paying to foliage, shifting sunlight, the activity of squirrels, and God's presence in it all.

So I planned away for this outdoor celebration, though not without a hitch or two since all of our belongings were in a storage unit. On occasion I'd wistfully gaze at boxes and disassembled furniture, more than a bit chagrined at how much I missed my stuff. All of that to say, we had no table on which to celebrate. So I bought a used, "rustic" wooden table advertised on Craigslist, and Mark helped me carry it and the benches down to a clearing in the forest. I bought four sage-green plates at Goodwill and yellowy-orange placemats at the dollar store. Mom loaned me serving dishes and silverware, and I decorated with leaves, twigs, Queen Anne's lace, and blue cornflowers.

Mom also helped me make the feast. She loaned me everything I needed to pull it together, including her time. We worked together assembling a three-cheese spinach lasagna she had made for us some time earlier. The recipe takes a lot of work. It requires cooking up a tomato sauce from fresh tomatoes as well as making a béchamel sauce and a spinach

ricotta mixture. It requires boiling lots and lots of lasagna noodles and grating cheese and then assembling it all. We talked as we worked side by side—about house building, children, change, the passage of time. I was very aware that she offered her time as a gift to me, even if she may have been a little perplexed as to why I would go to such lengths to fix a dinner for company when I didn't even have a house to serve it in. But even if she wondered such things, she kept them to herself, being the gracious mother-in-law that she is.

Todd and Karen joined us that first year, friends from those tender years when our daughters played together in preschool. Karen brought pears poached in port. I printed out fall poetry from the internet (“Dear books, safely stored, how I miss you!” I murmured as the printer clicked and hummed and then spit out a few sheets of poetry), and we read poems to each other over dessert. It may have felt a bit contrived, corny even, but everyone graciously played a part. We ate around a common table, closing a gap of a dozen years over the course of a night as we talked of losses and gains, joys and challenges.

That outdoor dinner became the foundation for the annual autumn equinox celebration we've had every year since. Every September on or near the fall equinox, our kitchen becomes the prepping place for a feast inspired by the summer-to-fall transition. Mark and I chop, sauté, roast, and bake squash, eggplant, tomatoes, and apples or pears; we offer food made from our own hands, and friendship, and the ordinary grace found in good food and changing seasons. We invite six or so acquaintances or friends with whom we laugh and talk, eat and drink. Then we meander down to the gazebo (lit with candles in jars hanging on landscape posts that Bob found for us at Goodwill), where we sit around the fire and share stories, poetry, songs, pictures, and artwork inspired by fall. It has become a sacramental meal reminiscent of meals from ages past.

## A History of Porridge

Throughout most of history, people depended on each other's contributions to a common table. Survival depended on hunting animals, foraging for seasonal grains, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and root vegetables, and the skills to turn these raw gleanings into edible food. Eventually hunters

and gatherers started keeping flocks and herds and cultivating grains. Those who kept (that is, nurtured, doctored, fed, and protected) animals and tended (planted, watered, weeded, and harvested) grains no longer depended exclusively on gathering and hunting. They could plan when to eat meat and store excess wheat, barley, quinoa, or teff—whatever their regional grain might be. As a result, they could awaken to a reliable breakfast every morning.

In the November 2013 issue of *The Atlantic*, a panel of twelve scientists, entrepreneurs, engineers, and historians of technology each chose twenty-five inventions and ranked them according to their significance for humanity. A team compiled the lists and came up with the fifty greatest

✧ *Food for Thought* ✧  
*about Equinoxes and Solstices*

I sometimes ask Mark if he knows whether the moon is waxing or waning. He always says waning, figuring that he will be right at least half the time—which he is. Mostly, my asking has made us both more inclined to notice. For thousands of years various religions (including Christianity) linked religious holidays to lunar cycles, equinoxes, and solstices, recognizing the real impact seasonal shifts have on our lives while simultaneously using them to reinforce beliefs.

All of the Jewish holidays are set according to lunar cycles around the solstices and equinoxes, and so their dates shift, just as the date for Easter shifts for Christians. For instance, the Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles is the first of the High Holy Feasts for Jews and marks the beginning of the New Year. It falls on the first new moon after the autumn equinox. Christians follow the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, which determined Easter would always be celebrated following Passover. The date of Easter moves around because Passover is held after the first full moon following the spring equinox. One of the beauties inherent in this choice for Easter (besides its relationship to Passover) that was not lost on the early church is the power in celebrating Life resurrected out of death. Easter happens when there are more hours of day than night, which begins with the

breakthroughs since the wheel.<sup>2</sup> Six related to food. I would like to emphasize that *only* six out of fifty related to food.

Archimedes's screw (no. 31) made the list, an invention devised in the third century BC that revolutionized irrigation, allowing water to be drawn from canals and streams to irrigate fields. The moldboard plow (no. 30) of the eighteenth century not only dug up soil but turned it over so that hard ground could be cultivated, which (like the screw) expanded farming possibilities. Nitrogen fixation (no. 11) emerged in 1918 and gave us synthetic fertilizer, which aided the so-called green revolution (no. 22) in the mid-twentieth century<sup>3</sup>—which, when combined with scientific plant breeding (no. 38), increased the amount of food we could pull out of every

spring equinox. In the early church, solstices and equinoxes landed on the twenty-fifth of the month rather than the twenty-first. Since Christmas was given an actual date, it was not moved even after the calendar shifted. Our observance of Jesus's birth on the longest night of the year (the winter solstice) underscores the significance of the Light from Heaven breaking into our darkness.

Because of God's tender mercy,  
the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of  
death,  
and to guide us to the path of peace.

Luke 1:78–79

Linking religious celebrations to equinoxes and solstices reflects a deep connection and respect for Earth's seasons and cycles.

Once we traded mostly outdoor lives for mostly indoor ones and stopped growing our own food, we no longer had much need or reason to pay attention to seasonal cycles. We didn't see the moon enough to know whether it was waxing toward full or waning toward new; we didn't mark the first day of autumn, winter, spring, or summer. Might redeeming these days by using them to celebrate the cyclical pattern of God's predictable, wonderful, and amazing creation be a kind of worship?

acre of farmland. And finally, the combine harvester (no. 50), invented in the 1930s, made it possible for one person to do the job of a whole slew of field laborers.

Farmer/writers such as Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, founder of The Land Institute, argue for putting the plow at or near the top of the list of monumental change agents. DNA researcher and social history writer Alistair Moffat states that “the great invention, the greatest revolution in our history was the invention of farming.” Most agrarian philosophers, historians, and activists would likely agree. Furthermore, Moffat asserts that farming changed the world because of the invention of porridge.<sup>4</sup>

Not many would quibble over a claim that farming changed the course of history, but porridge? Moffat takes the story back to the emergence of a reliable source of grain. People stopped tracking their food across the continent and settled in. They gathered for common meals over open fires and stewing pots, fires they could keep burning since they no longer needed to be nomadic to survive. Porridges, stews, and mutton cooked on spits brought people together to eat as part of a daily rhythm of sustenance, giving and receiving from each other as they fed their bodies, rested, and—perhaps most important—reinforced strong bonds with those with whom they lived and worked.

Using the energy that formerly went toward hunting and gathering, they crafted civilizations by building fortresses. With a stable food supply that could be turned into mush, mothers could feed their babies something besides breast milk (Moffat’s big argument). As a result, they weaned babies earlier and therefore had more children, which grew the human population substantially, adding people power that brought about all kinds of inventions and social changes.

Some of these changes made the world a better place, or at least a more comfortable and convenient place for people. Some did not. The agricultural trajectory worked out better for humans than for the rest of creation. Not surprisingly, some unintended consequences of change that seemed good at the time have now come back to haunt humans, who depend on a whole and healthy creation for their own well-being. Theologian Norman Wirzba, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is right to suggest that eating is an invitation to celebration as well as reconciliation and healing.

Grain that has been cracked, rolled, cut, or crushed and then cooked in water is still a worldwide breakfast. It says something powerful about the

staying power of real food, that is, whole foods that have not been overly tampered with, processed, added to, or subtracted from. Eating a hearty, steaming bowl of rolled oats dips our spoons, as it were, into an ever-simmering pot of porridge, linking us to a past that offers some guidance toward healing and reconciling eating habits that went awry. Oats make for a humble breakfast, and humility is a good first step.

Until the Industrial Revolution, farming (and eating) practices changed slowly. Roman plows and early American plows looked and worked pretty much the same. The ox- or horse-drawn plow aided hand plows for those who could afford oxen or horses, but otherwise the planting, cultivating, harvesting, and winnowing of grain went on relatively unchanged.

That an agricultural revolution would tag along behind the Industrial Revolution as new tools and practices replaced traditional ones makes all kinds of sense. Like the Industrial Revolution, the agricultural revolution that followed changed us in profound ways, particularly our relationship with food: how we grow it, yes, but also how we cook it, what we think about it, and how we eat it.

For example, the Industrial Revolution shifted labor away from farms to other places of employment. People commuted to work in factories and later to banks, schools, hospitals, libraries, stores, hotels, restaurants, and Wall Street. In 1790 (near the beginning of the Industrial Revolution), 90 percent of US laborers worked on farms. By 1900 that number had dropped to 38 percent. In 2010 less than 1 percent of the population claimed farming as an occupation, and about 2 percent of the population lived on farms.

To accommodate men who left home to commute to work elsewhere (as well as women and children in the lower classes), the main meal shifted from a big meal generally eaten together in the middle of the day to dinner at the end of the day, which was also usually eaten together. By the nineteenth century, families had figured out how to transport food for a midday meal in containers that would keep the lunches clean and safe from the various hazards of the working factory. The earliest lunch pails were woven baskets, which were eventually replaced with tobacco tins refashioned with handles to accommodate leftovers, hard-boiled eggs, bread and cheese, or sandwiches wrapped in a kerchief for a quick midday meal that was eaten alone or with coworkers. By the 1930s schoolchildren started sporting lunch boxes, and by the 1950s, when consumption came

to define the post-WWII self, lunch boxes became a marketable item and an important back-to-school supply.

### From Lunch Pail to Pop-Tarts

In the last fifty years we've grown increasingly accustomed to eating away from home, away from anything resembling a common table. In *Cooked*, Michael Pollan tells the anthropological story of the communal power of the cook fire that helped form us as social beings. In his brief social history of fire, he describes our movement from communal to isolated eating. First, Pollan says, we tamed fire and became social creatures who gathered, cooked, and ate around it. Then we brought fire inside with stone fireplaces, and then we made cast-iron ovens that eventually were replaced by steel ones. Soon after, fire disappeared altogether from our cooking, replaced by invisible electric currents running through ovens and radio waves bouncing off glass and plastic in our microwaves. By then we had pretty much left off cooking and eating with clan or family and popped frozen burritos in the microwave, eating on our own. Pollan concludes, "The microwave is as antisocial as the cook fire is communal."<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, a variety of studies support that we have become increasingly antisocial—more accurately asocial or isolated—in our eating patterns. Hearty, steaming bowls of porridge eaten to shore up energy for the day have been replaced by anything that can be consumed in a rush at the break of day—like a Pop-Tart (cinnamon brown sugar!) eaten on the way to the bus stop.

Post, the cereal company, created the first Pop-Tart-like food more than fifty years ago. In 1963 they rolled out the Country Square. This single-serving breakfast substitute (which doubled as an after-school snack) didn't need refrigeration, which was a big selling point. Kellogg stole the market six months later with Pop-Tarts, and while a lot of similar products fill grocery store shelves now, the multinational company sells millions of Pop-Tarts each year to families on the run. In fact, Pop-Tarts are so well favored that the US military airdropped 2.4 million of them into Afghanistan during the US invasion.<sup>6</sup>

Families in the United States live in a culture that still values families eating together. We see it in news articles, journal articles, and books

about families. We see family dinners depicted in television series that include comedy (*Modern Family*), family drama (*Parenthood*), historical drama (*Downton Abbey*), reality television (*Duck Dynasty*), and even law-and-order shows (*Blue Bloods*). Our norms suggest that eating meals on the run ought to be the *exception* to the rule rather than the rule. Still, this exception became less, well, *exceptional* as a necessary adaptation to facilitate afternoon and evening activities for parents and children alike.

Commercials, on the other hand, suggest that we are mostly a culture that eats fast food—that is, food on the run or food-for-fuel. Large food corporations producing those commercials are glad to meet America’s need for “nutritional” on-the-go food.

Food norms reflect a culture’s values and beliefs, and the United States is a culture without consensus on these matters. We are young, after all—only 250 years old. Historically speaking, the United States was the great experiment that (theoretically) welcomed people from all national backgrounds, converging to form one great nation and blending the strengths of the countries from which we came. But we’ve come to realize that’s not who we are. The United States is a country striving not only to value the differences represented among us but also to become better for having them. We work, with much difficulty, to foster rather than blur distinctions. While I prefer that goal, it probably means we will always be prone to food fads and swayed by a market eager both to fill the void of a food culture and to define our wants and needs for us.

In part, we long for something akin to a family dinner. However, we have a fairly firmly entrenched cultural belief that work, sports, music, drama, and various other civic and church-related opportunities offer more self-fulfillment and personal development than a family-cooked dinner enjoyed at leisure with the entire family—and maybe a guest or three or four—gathered around a table.

## Communion

Here’s a trivia question: What has changed the most in the last fifty years—the number of family meals eaten together or what family members do besides eat when they sit down together for supper? Regarding the first part of that question, nutritionist Katherine Brooking cites a study in

a medical journal that found that 43 percent of American families eat together daily, while a *CBS News* poll found that 75 percent of viewers said their families eat together daily.<sup>7</sup> That discrepancy goes to show that survey results depend somewhat on who gets asked. I can imagine that parents and teenagers might tally up family dinners differently.

Brooking also notes that even if we sit down together to eat somewhat *regularly* (a term she intentionally leaves vague), we don't engage each other as much. Besides eating, it appears that for a third of the CBS viewers the television is always on during mealtime, and nearly another third said it's on half the time. For some, the television provides background noise; for others it's a substitute for conversation. What's more, since we are seldom separated from our phones, is it any wonder that engaging our phones is becoming part of mealtime? One in ten folks in the CBS poll said that at least some of the time family members use their phones to text friends to set up after-dinner plans, follow the Blazers game, play games, or answer email during dinner. I wonder how long it will be before I get a text during a Thanksgiving dinner from someone sitting next to me that says, "hey pass the potatoes plz."

Jason Mitchell's doctoral dissertation provides a review of the research outlining benefits linked with families that eat together.<sup>8</sup> Developmental and behavioral problems in children are fewer, and families tend to communicate and support each other better. Likewise, children do better both academically and socially and are less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol or to suffer from depression. Mitchell notes that these studies are correlational—that is, families that eat together tend to be socially and physically healthier. That doesn't mean that eating together *makes* families socially or physically healthier. I remember an audacious claim I read a number of years ago: eat dinner together, and your teenage daughter will not get pregnant.

The oversimplification annoyed me then, and it annoys me still. Families that eat together are still plagued with conflict, tension, and troubles, and families that don't eat together raise children who grow up well-adjusted—without teen pregnancies, addictions, depression, or school dropout issues.

But still, what if eating together makes a difference in the social, emotional, and physical well-being of family members?

Perhaps the findings are about something else—something that doesn't get measured in studies. Perhaps we are discussing a value as old as

humanity itself, a value that is necessary for health and well-being—a core value of Christian faith. What if the findings are about the value of communion, the acceptance of the belief that we belong to something bigger than our isolated selves? Communion recognizes that we are members of communities that lay some claim on our choices, but communion is also life affirming. Wirzba links this value to Christian faith when he says that “trinitarian-inspired eating means that we eat to share and nurture life. . . . [I]t is about extending hospitality and making room for others to find life by sharing in our own. Self-offering, accepting responsibility for another’s well-being, turning one’s own life into nurture for others—these are the signs of life as empowered by the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

Studies that show links between eating together and well-being are telling us something important, even if a theologically grounded purpose for eating together is missing. Perhaps the findings in these studies reflect a grace-filled truth that joining with others over food offers a kind of scaffolding, a support to negotiate the trials of living in a postmodern, post-industrial, consumer-driven, individualistic culture.

In her book, *Eat with Joy*, Rachel Marie Stone says that things happen around the table that can’t happen elsewhere. “Perhaps more than anything, it’s the place where children absorb the message: *These are my people, and I belong here.*”<sup>10</sup> Eating with others gives us the daily opportunity to engage ideas, troubleshoot conflicts, encourage, inspire, correct, love, and be loved—both in body and soul.

I fear that sounds simplistic. I will attempt to clarify.

### **Communion, Take Two: The Attentive, Compassionate, Grateful Table**

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.” I memorized Revelation 3:20 in third grade, probably for Pioneer Girls. I heard sermons about opening my heart’s door to Jesus and liked the paintings of Jesus standing in warm yellow lamplight, knocking on a wooden door. What I *don’t* remember is hearing much about the eating part.

While references to eating are sprinkled throughout the Bible like a solid dusting of powdered sugar over French toast, until recently I mostly missed them, and I doubt I’m the only one. My food has pretty much always been

guaranteed, so food and eating references felt inconsequential for the most part; the main point was to get our souls in order. However, for those for whom food is not guaranteed, identifying with stories of harvests, feasts, sacrifices, drought, famine, and farming is more natural. Only recently have I come to see the deeply spiritual nature of food—physical, fragrant, savory food.

As it turns out, food is both a pleasure and our salvation. We need to eat to live, and either a plant or an animal needs to die so that we can go on living. But Jesus also sustains life now, not just because of what he did in the past but because he holds all creation together (Col. 1:17). Jesus comes to us, knocks on the door, and sits down for a meal—maybe spinach salad with hazelnuts, cranberries, and feta; butternut squash ravioli with pine nuts and sage browned butter; and apple strudel for dessert.

Feeding his disciples was one of the first things Jesus did after the resurrection—a breakfast of roasted fish served on the seashore by the risen Rabbi.

Eating offers a pleasurable way of communing. Unlike our family cat, Pollifax, whose diet consists of raw field mice and dry cat food eaten alone (generally with efficient gusto), eating isn't simply a functional pleasure. We are created with potential to enter each other's lives as we break bread together, to give and receive and enjoy pleasure as we partake in food that keeps us alive. The mystery of communion is that we eat in order to live more fully. We eat with others, with Jesus in our midst, that we might live better, love better, and be grateful.

When Protestants speak of communion, they typically mean a ceremony where bread and wine (or grape juice) are eaten and sipped to remember Christ, who sacrificed all for us. Various traditions practice communion in different ways and emphasize different elements and purposes.<sup>11</sup> My own religious tribe, the Quakers, observes the sacrament of communion during quiet communal worship every Sunday rather than with elements. We work to see all moments of life as sacramental—every meal as sacred time, an encounter with God. As an observant Quaker I fail at this; every meal does not, in fact, feel like communion.

It comforts me to remember that the possibility of sharing communion with God at each meal takes place more through God's initiation than through my ability to make it happen. Therefore I embrace the practice, however feebly, because I want to be engulfed daily in God's love and

presence, mindful of my commitments and belongingness, my shortcomings and need for reconciliation. When I pay attention, I more easily remember that life is sustained by God's daily grace and the sacrifices that bring me food.

Communion painted in broader strokes depicts a close relationship with another or others—a membership, as Wendell Berry and Norman Wirzba are fond of saying, a fondness that has rubbed off on me. Eating toward communion is to acknowledge various memberships: that we belong to God and are members of the human race, yes, but also that we share the earth with animals, plants, and microbes. All of earth's members depend on being able to sup from a global table that offers good water, clean air, and fertile soil chock-full of life. Wirzba says, "To know and appreciate these memberships, *and then to live sympathetically and compassionately into them*, is the crucial task."<sup>12</sup>

Jesus directed his followers to gather with thankfulness, to remember God's faithfulness, and to give and receive daily graces to and from each other. This is a reminder that we do not live independently of others but are sustained by the sacrifice and work of plants and animals, as well as the sacrifice and work of farm and ranch laborers, butchers and bakers, shelf stockers, and cashiers.

To challenge notions of autonomy and independence, I ask the college students in my Introduction to Sociology class whether they think they can make a hamburger without anyone else's help. On the first pass they say yes. Even if they've not done much in the way of cooking, they are pretty sure they can figure it out. I imagine they take access to YouTube videos for granted, though they couldn't go online if they were making a hamburger without help.

I ask them where they would get the cow, and suddenly we are having a very different conversation. "Without help" means they have to acquire a cow (ideally without stealing it), kill it, skin it, butcher it, create a way to grind the meat into hamburger, make a fire, and figure out something to use as a pan or grill to cook it on. Assuming they want a bun, they have to find, harvest, and grind their own wheat, discover the mysteries of yeast, and craft some sort of oven to bake it in. If they want onion, ketchup, mustard, and pickles (not to mention bacon!), each of these ingredients (except perhaps the onion) presents a challenge. By this time in our discussion, they decide they will settle for a skewered hunk of flesh

cooked over an open flame, but they realize even this is not as simple as they initially thought.

Embracing rather than fighting interdependence fosters humility, and really, neediness is not so bad. We need people who will work in fields and care for, slaughter, and butcher animals. We need grass for cows to eat, insects to pollinate fruits and vegetables, healthy soil to support pasture, forests, orchards, and plants of all sorts. We need good water and clean air. All at once, we see that we are members of something far bigger than the human race.

Once I recognized my interdependence and membership within larger communities, sympathy started percolating in the core of my being, inclining me toward compassion. Mark and I have become part of a growing number of people looking for ways to get food grown or raised in compassionate ways. We want workers to be paid a livable wage, animals to be raised humanely, and the soil to be treated in ways that foster its health—even if that makes it more difficult to control pests and weeds and to grow giant brussels sprouts.

Perhaps what this compassion and longing for justice is really about, as Wirzba suggests, is a desire to reconcile with God's divine love, which envelops all of God's creation. This integrated body-soul mindfulness gives full expression to the reconciling work of Jesus. By partaking in the sacrament of communion, we take Jesus into our mouths and bodies, a physical reminder that Jesus offers life and grace through his blood and body.

Theoretically, I can eat mindfully when I am alone, but I find it easier to be mindful when I am eating with another. Food that I grab from Subway and consume mindlessly to fill gut hunger while driving hither and yon is the opposite of communion. When I partake alone, I more easily stay blissfully ignorant of connections to my food and of memberships that call me toward empathy and compassion for all the people, animals, insects, and fire-water-air elements of creation that contributed something to the filling of my stomach.

### **Stretching toward Communion**

Most of us conform a fair bit to the norms of our culture; we can't help it—norm conformity helps us fit into a community. As a result, most of us

twenty-first-century Westerners struggle to balance norms that demand a high level of commitment to work and activities we value for ourselves and our children with a desire for communion and opportunities to forge bonds over food with our family and friends.

However, any and all of us can accept the invitation to eat at a common table by being more intentional about what we are eating, more attentive to those who share our table, and more grateful for God, others, and God's creation that sustains us. We move toward *intention* when we do some sleuthing and then make informed and life-giving choices about food we purchase (more on this to come). We move toward *attention* when we slow down, value, and engage those in whose presence we are eating. We move toward *gratitude* through the simple discipline of saying grace before a meal and saying thank you afterward.

Being intentional is being neighborly—an outward expression of our faith. It can mean committing to eating only fair-trade chocolate or going without it; it can mean buying eggs produced by pasture-based hens or going without them. Being intentional means learning the true cost of food and then choosing compassion and justice over convenience or thrift. Being intentional is also about thinking beyond what we eat as individuals to the eating needs of others. I'm not as good at this practice, but I want to stretch toward reflecting what the church has embraced since the beginning: feeding the hungry, eating with the lonely, and taking food to families with new babies or who may be dealing with illness, death, or grief.

My mother used candles to move us toward attentiveness. As a U-2 pilot for the Air Force, my father had an erratic schedule. He spent three to six months away any given year, and often when he was home his flight schedule required him to go to bed early and leave before dawn. On days we ate dinner together, my mother wanted her four young children to be calm, so sometimes she lit candles. The gently flickering flames brought us to a kind of awed attention, and this simple gesture did calm us. Candles made it easier for me to resist the temptation to poke Dan in the ribs to make him spit out his food (and get in trouble) or for Dan to make faces at Kathy to make her laugh so she'd spew food across the table (and get in trouble). The more peaceful atmosphere helped us refrain from feeding our dog, Dragon Lady (the nickname for the type of plane Dad flew), under the table. We'd offer her tidbits and then compete for bragging rights about who was her favorite. All of these behaviors elicited a sharp reprimand

from our mother when Dad was absent. While a look from Dad would still us equally well, candles made paying attention *nice*. I remember candlelit dinners and a kind of gentle communion that transpired those nights. We *tasted* our food rather than inhaled it. We talked, but mostly, we children learned to listen, which nourished our bodies and our relationships.

Others can move us toward attention—as my mother attempted to do with candles—or we can help others. When Mark and I first moved to the Midwest, our youngest daughter had a hard time transitioning, as we all did in our various ways. That first year I was home preparing for comprehensive exams and writing my dissertation proposal, and I did what I could to ease the transition for our daughters. About once a week I'd pick up Megan Anna from school for lunch and bring her home to a table set with placemats from my Granny—pink gingham rectangles with little white napkins hand painted with ducks. We'd eat simple food, sandwiches mostly, or Megan Anna's favorite, macaroni and cheese, on the Desert Rose dishes I acquired from my mother. I don't remember what we talked about—maybe our dreams from the night before or school or Oregon or projects or friends or the lack thereof. Then I'd take her back to school, both of us a little heartbroken at her sadness, yet hopeful, wanting to believe our connection in the middle of the day gave her a bit of strength and boldness and courage to keep trying to make friends, to fit in, to be okay with our choice to move her so far away from home.

Moving toward attention and strengthening relationships with friends and family is not always a sober task. We stretch toward communion when we go hog wild with a party. All that is required is a few friends, an idea or two, a bit of time shifted away from some other discretionary activity, and a measure of grace to fill in the gaps.

Eating dinner in a fort made of blankets in the living room creates memories and forges bonds of trust that are woven through love and laughter. Hosting themed parties—vintage night, game night, murder mysteries, pumpkin-carving parties, hoity-toity parties, and equinox and solstice celebrations—introduces laughter (which is something most of us could use a lot more of) and deepens friendships and memberships.

Picnics take food back to its origins. Eating outside in the sunlight, with fresh flowers and the occasional yellow jacket looking for a treat, surely calls forth gratitude (except for maybe the yellow jacket—though knowing they feast on insects that feast on our garden helps me tolerate

them). Ordinary sandwiches, carrot sticks, roasted nuts, apples, and a bit of chocolate taste more crisp, sweet, and rich when eaten midway through a hike while overlooking a waterfall or the ocean or a forest glade. It is as though our dependence on food, on others, on the earth, and on God is laid bare when we eat in creation's company.

The discipline of saying grace moves us upward toward gratitude, as does the simple act of acknowledging and thanking those who have contributed to feeding us. Mark and I often ask God's blessing on farmers, bakers, bees, and our chickens as a way of offering thanks to invisible or nonhuman sacrifices and work rendered. Sometimes we recite this simple, traditional blessing together: "Dear God, bless these gifts to our use, and us to Your service, and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others." Saying grace reminds us that food is a physical grace that keeps us going day after day.

For the most part, this has been a chapter about eating with others, but meals eaten alone can be eaten with a mindfulness of God's sustaining presence in our food and an awareness of our connection to others. We are never, after all, really alone. Besides, God knocks at the door, wanting to come in and eat with us.

When the weather allows it and I can wrestle myself out of the complacency that tells me eating alone at the kitchen table is more sane and easier than eating lunch outside, I take my plate up to the tree house or out to a rocking chair on the porch. Eating outside stops me from multitasking (checking email over lunch, for instance), which helps me to eat in God's presence more fully, to be aware of the world more fully, and to accept God's invitation to sup—to sit beside me, drawing me into communion with all God is and loves.

• *Shiitake Mushroom and Roasted Pepper Penne* •

- 8 oz. penne or fettuccine pasta
- 2 tbsp. olive oil or butter (or better yet, a combination)
- 2 c. (or more) shiitake mushrooms (other hearty mushrooms such



## To the Table

- as portabello, chanterelle, or whatever is native to your area can be substituted)
- ½ c. fresh basil
- 1 c. (or more) fresh spinach
- 1 tbsp. lemon juice
- 2–3 cloves garlic
- ½ c. roasted or smoked sweet peppers (roasted tomatoes can be substituted for a different, but equally delectable, taste)
- ½ c. Parmesan cheese
- ½–½ c. half-and-half or heavy cream
- 1 tbsp. pine nuts, toasted (optional)

Start a kettle of lightly salted water for boiling the pasta. Mince garlic, slice shiitake mushroom caps, thinly slice basil, and chop spinach. Add the pasta to the water and cook as directed (8–11 minutes).

Meanwhile, on low heat, heat the 2 tablespoons oil or butter in a skillet and add garlic. Sauté until soft but not browned. Add the mushrooms, turn the heat up to medium, and cook for 4–5 minutes until the mushrooms are soft. Turn off the heat and stir in chopped spinach, basil, lemon juice, and salt and pepper to taste. Cover the skillet and set aside.

Grate ½ cup Parmesan cheese and chop smoked peppers. Once the pasta is done, drain and add to the skillet along with peppers, half-and-half, and ⅔ of the cheese. Stir to combine and serve immediately, garnishing with more fresh basil, the remaining cheese, and pine nuts.

## Reflections and Questions

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1. Was a common table ever a part of your home? If so, describe it. If not, did you share that experience in the homes of others? What memories do you have of eating around a dinner table, either for holidays or during ordinary times?
2. How do you note the changing seasons in your home in both small and big ways? Can you imagine how acknowledging seasonal shifts might make it easier to see the presence of God in your kitchen and around your table? If this is a new concept, what might it look like

- for you to note changing seasons with a growing awareness of God's presence in the shifts and changes throughout the year?
3. How many of your meals are of the microwave/on-the-go/solitary variety, and how many fit into the cook-and-eat-it-with-others/com-munal category? What would it take to plan one extra meal of the cook-and-eat-with-others variety this week?
  4. What does the picture of a pot of porridge (or oatmeal) conjure up for you? Maybe a warm fire on a snowy day? Being forced to eat tasteless mush as a child? What were the breakfast foods of your childhood, and do you still eat them? If you don't, why did you change? Was it a change for better or worse, and how so?
  5. Does this chapter (and the last two questions) incline you to feel guilty for eating or serving Pop-Tarts, macaroni and cheese from a box, and microwavable dinners from time to time? Since guilt is never a good motivator, it might be helpful to reflect on the good news, that is, the grace of God news, for facing guilt in the light of various values you hold. Reflect on or talk about discrepancies you experience between differing personal, family, and ecological health goals, values, and needs. Take time to think about and then consider one thing you can change now to lessen the discrepancy. What else might you change in six months? A year?
  6. Earlier in this chapter, Wirzba says: "Trinitarian-inspired eating means that we eat to share and nurture life. . . . [I]t is about extending hospitality and making room for others to find life by sharing in our own. Self-offering, accepting responsibility for another's well-being, turning one's own life into nurture for others—these are the signs of life as empowered by the Spirit." Sit with this challenging picture of eating. How does it speak to your various obligations and memberships? How daunting is it? How empowering? Can you find inspiration and encouragement in ways you do this already? Journal or share your thoughts.
  7. Read John 21:1–14 and reflect on this story of Jesus eating with his disciples on the beach shortly after he had been crucified. Why might Jesus have chosen to fix the disciples breakfast instead of teaching, reprimanding, or instructing them? Imagine, for a minute, what it would be like to eat with Jesus. How might it change what it means

to eat when doing so with the One who called all things into being, including the very food you are eating?

8. How do you practice the sacrament of communion? What does reading about communion as discussed in this chapter add to how you might deepen your experience of it?
9. This chapter mentions that “being intentional [about what one eats] is being neighborly—an outward expression of our faith.” What would it take to learn the hidden cost of a food you eat regularly and then to make a commitment (small or large) to eating that food more ethically this month?