

# A Sermon for DaySpring

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## “Potluck at DaySpring”

Romans 14: 1-13

September 11, 2005

I know many of us understand the spiritual significance of food. To have the pork loin at the Northwood Inn is downright worshipful. So is that chocolate dessert at Chili’s that the two women in my life occasionally just order as their meal.

Food can be heavenly for us... but in the ancient world... it really was a big spiritual deal. Food... mattered. Food had sacred significance. What you ate... when you ate... if you ate.

The Jewish faith had all sorts of prohibitions, from Leviticus mostly (chapter 11), about meat and what meat you could eat. The Essenes, a Jewish sect, were particularly strict about meals. They wore certain clothes and the meals had to be prepared just so by a priest. Other religions in the ancient world were entirely vegetarian, while others ate meat that had even been sacrificed to their gods.

Now all these different diets were converging in a spiritual smorgasbord in the church at Rome. They had all confessed that Jesus was the Christ. They were followers of Jesus and in a world very hostile to this fledgling faith that was quite a bond between people. It really was **“you and me and us against the world.”**

But then they started doing church together. And one day, the staff and the Church Council got together and planned a potluck dinner in the fellowship hall just after morning worship. **“Everybody bring your favorite dish and we’ll have a great time of fellowship around the table breaking bread.”** That’s the way the announcement read in the church newsletter.

Well, the Sunday came and everyone showed up with his or her specialty and you know what happened. Down one side of the long banquet table there were vegetarian casseroles like you wouldn’t believe.

Potato and eggplant casserole.

Broccoli and rice.

Fresh vegetables and fruit of every kind.

It was great.

And then down the other side of the table, there were briskets and some of those little wienies in barbecue sauce. There were Swedish meatballs and spiral hams. There was a big tuna salad and tons of fried chicken from Burning Bush’s. Barbeque links from Uncle Daniel’s.

Everybody lined up and started filling up his or her plate. And half the folks were filling their plates up with brisket and ham and chicken... and a few green beans just because they knew they needed some Vitamin C. And then the rest of the group just went down the other side of the table.

And then, of course, the room got to feeling really uncomfortable and all the vegetarians sat on the right side of the fellowship hall and the brisket eaters sat on the left and they began to **“talk amongst themselves.”**

**“Can you believe they’re eating fried chicken and ham? Haven’t they read the Bible? ... The Bible says it’s wrong. Leviticus says it, I believe it, that settles it.”**

**“Amen... and look at that one over there, his plate’s full of meatballs and he teaches the youth Sunday School class. He’s going to lead them astray.”**

**“Some people just can’t help themselves... they’re spiritually immature.”**

**“Well brisket has never touched these lips... and never will.”**

The other side of fellowship hall had plenty of murmuring as well. Only instead of being offended, the sounds had a kind of “arrogant air” about them.

**“I’m not believing this. They actually still think that eating meat is a sin. Some people just can’t think for themselves.”**

**“Well, they just get so hung up with the literal interpretation of scripture. I’m glad I’ve risen above all that and am freed up now.”**

**“Jesus said brisket was okay, didn’t he? Didn’t he say, it’s not what goes in your mouth that contaminates you, but what comes out? And didn’t the Apostle Peter get a vision from God telling us we could eat anything God had made?”**

The potluck dinner was a disaster and the awkward feeling in the room began to spread throughout the church. Now it was an issue and it wasn’t just that people felt differently about the issue, they began to feel differently about one another. There was a lot of “looking-down” going on, if you know what I mean. And when two people are looking down at one another of course, they aren’t really seeing each other.

It was potentially an issue that might split the church and people began to huddle here and there. They circled up because that’s what we do when we feel threatened. And folks started checking each other out to see where they were on this meat issue.

And of course there was a kind of “meat continuum” in the church. There were folks on the vegetarian side that just wouldn’t even come near meat. They were in favor of an all out prohibition on meat... and it was thought of as spiritually unhealthy... as if meat itself were evil and God turned his nose up at it too.

Other vegetarians, of course, thought just the opposite. These were God’s creatures and they had feelings too. It was barbaric eating meat.

Some of the vegetarians were just concerned about health. Abuse of meat was a serious health threat. One out of every five Romans was suffering from the effects of over-meat-eating.

And then there were some vegetarians who had once been hooked on meat in pagan religions and they couldn’t touch it for fear that it would pull them back into a life-style Christ had brought them out of. Some of these were in support groups... **“Meat-eaters Anonymous.” “Hi, I’m Burt, I used to eat meat offered to idols.”**

Some of the vegetarians just ate meat on special occasions. Some of them just didn’t eat it in public and kept some beef jerky in the bedroom closet for a late night snack after the kids went to bed. A lot of those in church fell into this camp. It’s not that church-going vegetarians didn’t eat meat; they just didn’t eat it in front of one another. The joke was that you should always take two church-going vegetarians fishing with you because if you only took one, he’d eat all your fried chicken.

On the other end of the spectrum were meat eaters of all kinds.

Some who just enjoyed the taste.

Others who enjoyed the social aspect of it.

Others who were ecstatic over the new freedom they’d found in this faith that seemed to be unhooked from the legalism of the past. They loved preaching the grace of Jesus to one another. Some of these seemed to take special delight in purchasing a big brisket out in the market place for all to see. Some were almost rebellious about it.

Well... these differences and this diversity was in the church and potentially a problem so Paul had to write about it. So, it’s the Potluck that prompts this teaching and potentially... their growth. Because Paul is going to take them beyond where they are. That’s what community will invite you to... Growth is one of the by-products... at least it can be, of being in a community where there are brisket lovers and hard-core vegetarians sharing a pew.

It’s a gift diversity might give.

I’ve tried to imagine this week... what our potluck would be like these days. Man, what a smorgasbord that would be. Just imagine it... a long banquet table out there in the Narthex and everyone’s brought their favorite dish. Imagine with me now...

We’d have a dish that’s been in the family for decades... it’s called “SBC Fricassee”... a real traditional Baptist dish. And right next to that is a dish made with an even older recipe... ancient even... It’s a dish called “Church Father Flambé.” Elegant thing.

You just can’t begin to imagine all that’s on that table.

There’re some Social Conservative casseroles...

Some Libertarian Liverwurst...

There’s some Social Justice Jambalaya... real spicy...

Evangelical Eggplant Extreme...

Someone baked a cake in the shape of a donkey.

Someone else has an elephant jello mold.

This table has everything on it... everyone has brought a favorite. There's some Home Schooling Hash and a Big Public School Soufflé. There's an Apple Pie with American Flags coming out of it... and it's sitting right next to some Pacifist Porridge.

Someone brought a ham glazed with bourbon sauce – seems to be disappearing in a hurry ... Someone brought a jug of Sweet Totaller's Tea.

There's a big barbecued tray of Old Baylor Line Links and that traditional Waco dish is sitting right next to some 2012 Tetrizzini.

There's a family that brought a "New Pilgrim Patties" – pretty standard dish – easy to make... and another that brought a dish that no one can tell what it is... it's just labeled "The Mystery." It's got everything under the sun in it... I don't even think the person who made it knows all that's there.

What a feast it is.

Philosophical Gumbo... Liturgical Lima Beans...

Missional Meatloaf.

Contemplative Corny Dogs.

There's even some PB&J. Praise Band and Jam... Sort of a charismatic dish... little light... The kids like it, though.

Can you see this potluck? So many dishes. Now underneath it all, mind you... there is a great, beautiful tablecloth... very simple and classic design.

It's got embroidered on it... all over it... the words **"God was in Christ reconciling the world."** It's an expensive cloth... quite an investment the church made in it along the way and we all picked it out. But, on top of it... there's so very much.

How does it make you feel when you go through the line? I don't know about you, but I find myself feeling certain things and thinking certain things almost before I'm aware that I'm feeling and thinking them. They're just there... these feelings and thoughts.

**"Man, if she knew what was good for her, she wouldn't be eating that... not sure I want to sit by her if that's all she's going to put on her plate. You can't just have Social Conservative Casserole and nothing else."** I didn't mean to think that, I just did.

It's just there... I'm saying to myself, **"That dish over there really shouldn't be on this table because I'm pretty sure Jesus never ate it."**

I'm just having these thoughts. **"If I went back for second helpings of Social Justice Jambalaya, will folks at my table wonder if I'm a liberal?"**

**"Better get some of those Ole' Baylor Line Links or someone might be offended."**

I just confess there are thoughts there... and feelings. I shy away from some of the dishes... I turn my nose up at others. Some I'm tempted to try and sneak off the table while no one's looking. Other dishes I celebrate at some visceral level and I like the ones who cooked them up.

Why is that? It's human nature, isn't it? To want to be with those who have the same tastes we have... the same opinions. I guess, not an evil thing, in and of itself. But certainly not a good thing... not an instinct that is helpful out there in the world or in here... in this diverse body.

But the ego seems to need its props... opinions and like-mindedness and affirmations to keep it standing. It just feels better when the world validates who you are and what you think.

And it's human...

and we do need a place of resonance...

communities of support where folks understand.

But we also need communities that are diverse and challenge who we are and what we think. So... that big spread out there... this diverse place, can be a great gift to us.

It can be, if we pay attention to Paul and to his example and his guidance... and in his letter to the Romans he makes a couple of things clear... sort of... clear. Did you notice that? Paul is straddling the diversity fence and that may be where we're all supposed to be. In that precarious place where you have to trust the Spirit to stay in balance.

On the one side... the one hand... Paul makes no bones about where he stands on this issue of meat. **"I'm convinced no food is unclean... I can eat pickled pig's feet if I want to."** He even says that those who believe as

he does about food are stronger in the faith... they can eat anything... they've transcended that cultural, time-bound piety. And in another place he says, **"Do not allow what you consider to be good to be spoken of as evil."**

So, Paul says and Paul models a kind of honesty. He doesn't, as he hears about this problem with meat, pretend that he believes eating meat is a sin. Paul is non-anxiously clear about what he believes and encourages them to be so. **"Each one should be fully convinced in her own mind."**

Paul engages them by offering, in a non-defensive way, his own convictions on the matter... and wants them to do the same. **"If someone says your brisket is evil and you know it to be good... you should speak up."**

So... Paul has one foot carefully positioned on that honest side of the fence. He doesn't advise us to deal with our diversity by pretending it's not there. Where we walk out into the Narthex and go through the line saying, **"Well, it's all pretty much the same meat and potatoes... just thrown together differently."**

No... he invites a careful, calm confession.

But then... on the other hand and other side of this fence... he carefully puts his other foot where relationship is the priority. The unity of the body is lifted up and the needs of our brothers and sisters are what matter most.

**"Accept your brother... your sister. Assume that their motivation is right and that they do what they do because of their relationship to God. Assume that..."**

**"Stop passing judgment on one another and vow never to be a stumbling block to a vulnerable one. Don't trip new believers up with your freedom. That's not loving,"** he says.

**"Make every effort to do what leads to peace... even if that means giving up some things that you really like or keeping quiet on a conviction."**

You see how carefully Paul is balancing up there on that fence. He offers his opinion but then says to them, **"Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God."**

Potluck is a reality in every church... that kind of balance to, not only deal with it, but be blessed by it. A loving potluck is what God has intended. It's reflected in God. God is both One and Diverse. God is a Trinity and in the Trinity there is unity and difference... one but three. All creation reflects that essential reality and the church has and DaySpring can.

Not without our growing up, though. And the potluck will prompt that... because you'll be at the table with folks who have different appetites than you do. You'll be bothered... you'll react... you'll distance... you'll judge... And then... in that moment you have the chance to change.

To remember that followers of Jesus don't judge. The Saints tell us that's the most difficult sin to overcome... and it's a gospel command to do so. We aren't to judge.

You'll be tempted to size someone up, **"Liberal ... Closed-minded. They wouldn't eat that if they'd read what I've read."** And then you'll remember that they are fearfully and wonderfully made and that they belong to God. And you'll sacrifice something of who you are and be changed because you did.

You'll start to critique and think... **"Well, maybe I'm the one who's blind here... is that possible... that I have something to learn?"**

You see what happens... You start making room for the other... the stranger. You start treating the one who offends you as if he is Jesus.

You'll feel conviction and maybe even righteous indignation arises and you'll think about the peace of this body... or the vulnerable ones... Most of all, you'll remember the way Jesus always transcended policy and dogma to find a way to love.

**"Jesus, the law says to stone this one; we caught her in adultery."** They were right – that's what the law stated. And Jesus, who is the author of the law, transcends it. **"Just go and sin no more..."**

Well, there's so much on our table... Most of it's very good stuff and I hope we all have the maturity to be open and even taste a few new dishes. I didn't eat broccoli until I was twenty and then someone topped it with Hollandaise and I've been hooked ever since. There's no telling what sort of culinary, spiritual pleasure awaits you. Good things will happen as we gather around this table of our Lord. Christ is Lord... and if we can say that and, more importantly, live that... potluck at DaySpring will be a wonderful thing.