

“Kickball” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
September 12, 2010 – Proper 19C

It's good that on kick-off Sunday our gospel reading begins with food. Because so much of what we do here does that too. Even kick-off Sunday which marks the beginning of the program year doesn't actually begin with a program. It begins with a picnic. After the service we'll head out to Moran Park and eat hotdogs and hamburgers and salads and desserts. And the last time a bunch of us were together there was food too. Just three days ago we distributed food to over 100 families – 5000 lbs of cucumbers, tomatoes, donuts, breads, eggplant, lettuce, potatoes, peppers, corn and there were snacks in the undercroft that day too. Soon we'll begin to meet again as small groups through our Holy Chow ministry, taking the opportunity to get to know each other better over meals in people's homes – besides the wonderful company and stimulating conversation, I've also heard stories of the fabulous appetizers and soups and desserts that are the Holy Chow experience. Every time the youth group gets together there is a meal. Stephens ministers too. And of course every Sunday, our central action is eating together - a feast of bread and wine that is Body and Blood and that's food that not only fills us but shapes us into the Body of Christ we become. We are definitely a parish that eats well and is learning to share food well. And the food that is central to our life together sustains us, strengthens us and actually helps make us who we are.

But the gospel today wasn't so much about what was being eaten, was it. Jesus was clear and the church is clear too that what we eat matters – but the gospel goes further than that. In fact, the action that got Jesus the most attention from the religious authorities wasn't about what he was eating, it was about who he was eating with. “The tax collectors and sinners were coming near to Jesus and listening to him,” the gospel said this morning. “And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes tax collectors and sinners and eats with them.’” And those were some of the nicest things they were saying. By

this point in the gospel story, Jesus had a reputation for eating with the wrong sort of crowd.

And the Pharisees and the scribes noticed the type of crowd at the table because eating together was -- literally like it is for us -- a religious experience. For the faithful of Jesus' day, to eat together was a celebration of faith, which included very specific rules about what happened around the table every time they were together. According to religious law, cleanliness was paramount: clean food, clean dishes, clean hands, clean hearts. A proper Jewish meal was actually a worship service in which believers honored God by sanctifying the most ordinary details of their lives.

And while there is something truly beautiful and even holy about "sanctifying the most ordinary details of life," to some extent it even fits the theology we are trying to live out here, the problem was that it all had gone too far. It had gotten to the point that the un-clean, however defined, were unwelcome at the table; so it had become faithful practice to exclude people from the most ordinary, potentially holy details of life -- from the common meals. Clear, un-crossable lines of purity had been drawn around the feasts themselves. And so what Jesus was doing was crossing those lines and it was truly, religiously scandalous which is why they were watching him. He was eating with the wrong people and therefore doing faith with the wrong people -- the sinful, the lost, the beyond-the-margins-of-acceptable-company-type of people. And he was doing it because he knew they were hungry too, and I believe he was doing it also because he knew that there was something of holiness even among those who had become "them."

So in those meals, Jesus was essentially redefining what the feast itself was all about. Eating together was still about faith, certainly. But the meals weren't holy by virtue of who wasn't there, or what contagions were not present at the table. They weren't about purity, the way Jesus was doing it. They were holy, faithful meals because of the fact that they encompassed the least and the lost, because they welcomed not

only those who were already at the table but also the sinful and the searching who wanted and needed more God; they were holy by virtue of feeding all who hungered.

And not only that – I want to add one more thing. Eating together was holy enough to not only welcome those who showed up. Jesus valued the meal enough to seek out those who weren't even there yet or who had been there but had fallen away. Christ sought out those who were missing, like a shepherd searched out the lost sheep, and like a woman with a broom and a missing coin, swept the corners and the darker places until she found it.

And so there is a lot in this for us as we kick-off we feast. Part of what we do today is celebrate who we are here, and what we've got going on here and who it is that we are becoming here. And in that alone there is much to celebrate. We are alive and we are well and we are growing and it's good. But this gospel reminds us that there's also some stretching to do; there's always some stretching to do. We are wonderful at receiving all who come and we take a healthy pride in this being an open and welcoming table. But I'm not so sure we're as good at seeking out as we are at receiving. Who are the lost sheep of Grace who could use a call or an invite or a "Hey, we miss you?" Who are the folks who are out there in the darker corners who are hungry for Grace but need a little help in getting swept in. This gospel reminds us to not only welcome and be those who are welcomed but to do a little seeking, a little searching, a little sweeping for those who hunger for the meals we share.

So let's set up tables in surprising places, on the outsides of church in a celebration of a broadly inviting way of being with God. Let's enjoy one another but also notice who isn't here and search them out. Let's be scandalous in a holy sort of way and eat with all those who hunger regardless of just about anything. Let us be Body of Christ for the world.