

## ***“Eating Your Way to Heaven”***

*Acts 2:42-47 • Philipians 1:1-11*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 1, 2015

This morning we continue talking about the five activities that fully-devoted followers of Jesus do, which means that these should be the five core values of our church. We should organize around them, set goals in relation to them, and measure our results according to how we are helping more and more people engage in the practices of worshiping, connecting, growing, serving and inviting.

Close your eyes for a minute. Now, picture in your mind a cute, lovable, cuddly animal. Everybody have a picture? OK, you can open your eyes. How many of you pictured a puppy or a kitten? How many of you pictured a porcupine? Not many. Porcupines are just not cuddly animals. First of all they are rodents. Rodents with 30,000 barbed quills attached to their body. There are no movies celebrating porcupines, no songs, not even country and western songs. The name porcupine doesn't help either. It literally means “pig with thorns,” and the scientific name means “animal with the irritating back.” I'm not making this up. Nobody wants to be near a porcupine. Not even other porcupines. They are generally solitary animals. But even porcupines need love. And as you can imagine, love can be risky business if you're a porcupine.

Too often, I think, we are a lot like porcupines. We long for relationships but we don't want to get hurt so we avoid spending time with others. We isolate ourselves, keeping our relationships at a superficial level. We talk about the weather. We keep people at a distance. Maybe we're afraid that if others get to know us they won't like what they see. Maybe it's because real friendship means we have to love people no matter what.

But the Bible is clear that God made you for relationship. At the very beginning of the Bible, God said, “It's not good for man to be alone.” We were made in the image of God, who is in perfect relationship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John Ortberg writes, “Our need for

community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and water are to the human body.” It turns out that community is the place where God meets us.

The gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus giving us the great commission and then he makes a *promise*. He says, “I will be with you always.” Jesus actually fulfills one of the central themes of the Bible. God promises over and over that he will not leave us alone. He will be with us. When he calls Abraham to leave his country and go to another place, God says, “I will be with you.” He promises to be with Moses when he confronts Pharaoh and with Joshua as they are about to cross into the Promised Land. He makes the same promise to Gideon and to Isaiah and to you. Jesus says, “You will be with me forever.” The promise, though, is not a private promise between you and God. The promise is that he will be with us *in community*. Being a follower of Jesus means being in a community of other believers. There are no Lone Ranger Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. We belong to one another.”

The Greek word the Bible uses for this kind of Christian community is *koinonia*. We usually translate it as “fellowship.” Our memory verse, Acts 2:42, says, “they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the *fellowship*. We often make the mistake in churches of thinking of fellowship as punch and cookies. We call the room where we consume punch and cookies the “fellowship hall.” And that completely misses the point. Our reading today from Philipppians 1 uses the same word, *koinonia*, but it's translated as partnership. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now.”

The word *koinonia*, fellowship, is also used to describe marriage. Real, biblical fellowship is

a mutual, loving community centered on Christ with a common mission. Paul thanks God for the Philippians “partnership in the gospel.” When we come into the fellowship, the community of believers, we become part of a mission, the mission of God in the world. As we go together, baptizing and teaching, Jesus is with us. That’s the *promise*.

But there’s a *problem*. Porcupines basically have two methods for handling relationships: withdraw or attack. We really aren’t that different from porcupines I guess. Dallas Willard pointed out that assault and withdrawal are the two essential forms of relational sin. When we get hurt, we want to hurt back. We want revenge. Or we withdraw and try to keep from being hurt again. John Ortberg points out that the porcupine’s dilemma is to get close without getting hurt. The truth is that we are all sinful people. We all have an irritating back. We all have the ability to hurt others and to be hurt by others.

These days there is an epidemic of both assaulting and withdrawing. All you have to do is turn on the news to hear about the ways people hurt one another. But nobody reports on the withdrawal. We are becoming more and more isolated. Mother Teresa said, “Loneliness is the leprosy of modern society.” The real problem is that we try to create community for what we can get out of it. And that always ends in either attacking or withdrawing.

So what do we do? How do we stand against the human nature of attack or withdrawal? Here’s a *proposal*. Anybody ever get married by accident? I’m not asking if you think it was a mistake, just whether it was an accident. Nobody accidentally gets married. There’s too much you have to do. You have to go to the courthouse and fill out paperwork. You have to take oaths and have some official testify that you really did get married. In the marriage ceremony, one of the requirements of the state is that you have to publicly state that you intend to get married. To get married it’s not enough to be relational, you have to be intentional. I think the same thing applies to Christian

community. For us to be a genuine community we each have to be intentionally relational. We have to do it on purpose. What do we have to be intentional about? Time. Ortberg says, “the requirement for true intimacy is chunks of unhurried time.” I propose that one of the best ways to spend that kind of time with someone is over a meal. Not fast food but a real meal. You can’t microwave friendship.

Over and over in Jesus’ ministry he was eating with people – tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees. “His mission strategy was a long meal stretching into the evening.” That strategy will work for us, too. Fully-devoted followers of Jesus are intentional about building deep, meaningful relationships with people and eating together is a great way to build friendships. The reason is that typically a meal will last longer than the surface conversation. Your choice is to either sit silently or to begin to have deeper conversations.

This was certainly the case with the early church. In our reading from Acts 2, eating together is mentioned three times. Nothing else is repeated in that passage. Meals were clearly a significant part of their life together and it should be a significant part of ours.

So let me challenge you a little. In your bulletin is a small card that reads, “Today I met...” We’ve used these before. The challenge today is for you to meet someone you don’t know, get their name, and then sit with them at lunch in Kleberg Hall. Engage in real conversation. Get to know each other. When you leave here today, be intentional about having a meal with someone you don’t know well. Because, as Tim Chester writes, “when you combine a passion for Jesus with shared meals, you create potent gospel opportunities.” As you spend time with others, my prayer is “that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”