

Good morning everyone! I'm so grateful to share in the Agape meal with you all for the first time this morning...I've never gotten to be part of a service like this before...Truth be told, I'd never even heard of a church doing an agape meal before I came here. But I'm really excited to do this because the idea of an agape meal has meant a lot to me and I want to tell you why.

So the summer before I started college...before I'd ever taken a class in religious studies, I was so excited to get my school's course catalogue and take a look at all the classes I could finally start taking now that I was done with high school. I mulled over course offerings and quickly saw a class I knew I had to get under my belt: History of Early Christianity! Probably not what every first year student dreams of taking, but I was really excited. Once the class started though, I quickly found that I had no idea what I was getting myself into that first semester.

By selecting History of Early Christianity as one of my first ever college classes, I ended up having to read a lot of really old documents from the first century that were translated into English many years ago so they made very little sense to me. I also got to hear a lot about how the earliest Christians were seen by outside groups and how people in the first few centuries after Jesus lived understood the Bible. It was a lot of information to sift through, but even so, I ended up loving the class, and a big reason why I loved it so much was because my professor was very direct and honest about the history of Christianity...He had no use for trying to sugar-coat any of the controversies early Christians faced and the truth is, a lot of the history we learned was quite disturbing.

All this is to say that I came away from that class at the end of the semester with a new lens through which I saw the foundations of Christianity, and if I had to summarize what I ultimately took away in just a few words, it would be this: At no point in the history of Christianity has anyone ever fully agreed on anything. In fact, if

there's one thing that has defined Christianity all throughout history, it's disagreements and rifts among people who you might imagine based on their designation as Christians would agree, but ultimately don't.

Now, at that point, I'd taken one course in Christian history as a freshman in college so you might think my views have evolved since then! But over time I've only grown more confident that throughout every generation of Christian history, there has been deep disagreement on what our faith means for us. And this is especially true of Christians in the United States. The history of this country is shaped by different Christian denominations who left religious persecution in other countries behind for freedom in the Americas. Their understandings of what it meant to be Christians were different and the importance of power in this country has made holding certain religious views especially potent and divisive.

But even though the overarching take away for me from that course had to do with these differences among Christians, there was something else I learned that's stayed with me ever since. I learned that the earliest Christians—many of whom disagreed bitterly about their faith—had a worship ritual that bound them together in this profound way. The earliest Christians would gather to sing, declare their beliefs, commit to ethical choices, and share in a feast that celebrated God's unconditional and unmerited love. This meal was known as the agape meal or love feast. And it was so important that they would bring bits of food to anyone who couldn't come because of illness or imprisonment and that was because this meal was more than food to them. It was a feeling of unity to God and their community and it was an essential expression of their connection through God's love.

Now it's important that you understand that this was a time when people were still figuring out what it meant to be followers of Jesus. People weren't sure yet what parts of Judaism they should leave behind and what rituals were still important. For

Gentiles, or people who weren't Jewish, they had to figure out what parts of their former religious traditions didn't align with their new faith and leave those rites behind. These were intense issues, emotional issues. But regardless of where people fell, they all needed food, they all needed community, and what was most important to them in their faith was this unconditional love at the center of Jesus's life. So in their shared meal they found it within themselves to create space for difference.

From the moment I learned about this, I loved it because I saw something that continues to be true for us thousands of years later: Even though we all differ in what we believe, we are still connected to one another in ways that might not be obvious on the surface. And one of the things that reminds us of this connection is our mutual need for food and for each other. There's something powerful about the connection that happens when we eat together. That's why the pandemic was so hard for so many of us. We were deprived of that connection. So I think we all know the power of a meal to connect us. But I really think that sharing meals together can do something more...I think that it has the power to transform our hearts. And to tell you what I mean by this, I want to tell you about a man named Derek Black.

If you've never heard of him, Derek Black is the son of Don Black, the creator of the first and largest website dedicated to white nationalism: Stormfront. You may have heard of Derek's godfather, David Duke, who is one of the most radical proponents of white supremacy and white nationalism in this country. He was formerly a grand wizard in the KKK, and from a young age, Don Black and his wife Chloe, alongside David Duke raised Derek at the forefront of white nationalism. From the moment Derek was born, he was thrust into the insular world of white nationalism and was taught that America was meant to be a place for white Europeans only and anyone else didn't belong here. Starting around age 9, Derek attended white nationalist conventions with his family, later he became a co-host of a radio program with his father on the topic of white nationalism, and it wasn't long before Derek started to be

seen by his family and white nationalists as “the future” of the movement and it's heir. By the time Derek graduated from high school and enrolled in community college, he had won a seat on a Republican committee in the town where he lived in South Florida, running on a platform of white nationalism and beating the incumbent with 60 percent of the vote. He'd accomplished all of this at only 19 years old.

So it was shocking when Derek finished community college and decided to apply to a top-rated liberal arts school in Sarasota, Florida: the New College of Florida. He applied to study medieval European history and got in. And to many, this was an odd choice because the New College of Florida has a reputation for being very progressive. It's known for it's openness to students in the LGBTQIA+ community, and it's a hotbed for diversity. But when Derek got in, his family wasn't worried about his views changing because he was so independently devoted to the cause of white nationalism throughout his entire life.

Even so, Derek was quickly immersed in the multicultural atmosphere at the New College. He made friends who weren't from the United States...immigrants from all over. He met Jewish people, trans and gay students, just the sorts of people he'd condemned on the radio program he did with his father most of his life. But he found he liked these people and decided to keep his racist views to himself and ended up having a great social life at college. He went to parties and gatherings, played music with his peers. He even dated a Jewish woman during his first semester of college. It was tough for Derek to live a double life but he didn't have to for long. He studied abroad in Europe during his second semester and while he was away, an upperclassman at the New College came across a photo of Derek while researching terrorist organizations online. The student shared the photo online and within hours the entire student body learned that they'd been attending school with a white nationalist.

As you can imagine this was a horrible shock. Black and brown students, faculty, and staff did not feel safe. Derek's friends were appalled and betrayed. When Derek returned, the anger and betrayal students felt was so bad, he had to move off campus. Strangers flipped him off, people threw things at him in the Library, many refused to speak to him. But there was one student who was an acquaintance of Derek's from his first semester, who just couldn't make sense of this. It was a man named Matthew Stevenson who was the only Orthodox Jew at the New College during that time and he hosted Shabbat dinners in his apartment every Friday night. When Derek was back on campus and most students shunned him, Matthew decided to reach out and ask, "What are you doing Friday night?"

Matthew's invitation to Shabbat was the only social invitation Derek had gotten after coming back and to the surprise of many, he decided to go. While Matthew typically hosted a large group for Shabbat, several friends refused to join knowing Derek was there. At first, Matthew asked those who came not to mention white nationalism. They agreed and the dinner went well. Derek was polite and respectful of others, and came back week after week until over time, the Shabbat group returned to its usual size. Eventually, members of the group started to ask Derek about his views. He shared some of them openly and talked about them, but he also spent time listening to the points of view raised by other people. Many of his peers were confused and angered still by his views, but the truth was, Derek's views were starting to change. Through his relationships with the very people he'd been taught to condemn, he was beginning to have trouble reaffirming his ideology. Everything he'd been taught by his family his whole life started to crumble and eventually a friend from the Shabbat dinners confronted him and said: "I feel like you are a representative of a movement you barely buy into. You need to identify with more than 1/50th of a belief system to consider it yours." And over time Derek found through his relationships and courses that this concept of race and whiteness was invented. His ideology unraveled and he

ultimately penned a letter to the Southern Poverty Law Center fully renouncing white nationalism.

It was through the kind of deep listening that happens while sharing a meal that Derek's heart began to change. It was relationships built by a desire to understand, out of love. Not out of a desire to prove a point or to respond, but truly seeking to understand, that this transformation happens. This is hard work, it was brutal for Derek, but I want to tell you that this is the work of our faith. In the scripture from Deuteronomy I read earlier, we hear instructions given to the Jewish people when they established for themselves a new community after years of enslavement by the Egyptians. They are taught to bring their first fruits, to share with all those they can as a demonstration of their gratitude to God—The best bounty of their harvest. We too have that invitation.

The greatest gift we can give one another is a willingness to listen. To seek to understand in the way we long to be understood and to really see people. These are our first fruits. So may we allow our hearts to be transformed by listening deeply and sharing honestly. May that be our gift to God and one another. Amen.

Rev. Lisa Schrott
November 20, 2022
The Bread of Life
John 6:25-35

Our New Testament scripture is from the Gospel of John. It comes the day after Jesus has fed a crowd of 5000 with five barley loaves and two fish. After this feeding, Jesus crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and the crowds followed him. They questioned Jesus, wanting to know more about him. Hear these words from John chapter 6:

When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

Then they – the crowds- said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." **This is the Word of the Lord.**
Thanks be to God.

In her book, *Holy Disunity. How What Separates Us Can Save Us*, the Rev. Layton Williams opens her chapter titled the Gift of Hunger with a joke attributed to the late comedian Mitch Hedberg. The joke goes... "You know how when you go to a restaurant on the weekends and it's busy so they start a waiting list, they say, "Dufrene, party of two, table ready for Dufrene, party of two." And if no one answers they'll say the name again: "Dufrene, party of two." But then if no one answers, they'll move on to the next name. "Bush, party of three." Yeah, but what happened to the Dufrenes? No one seems to care. Who can eat at a time like this? People are missing. You people are selfish. The Dufrenes are in someone's trunk right now, with duct tape over their mouths. And they're hungry! That's a double whammy. We need some help. 'Bush, search party of three." You can eat when you find the Dufrenes."

Williams goes on to say that she loves this joke "because it points to something common that we never even spare a moment to think about. What did happen to the people who never showed up at the host stand when their name was called?" ¹

¹Layton Williams. *Holy Disunity. How What Separates Us Can Save Us*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2019; p139

I think Jesus would appreciate this joke. Jesus was surrounded by crowds of people who were waiting for their name to be called. They ask him, "What sign are you going to give us, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" Just like those waiting for their name to be called are so consumed by their self-interest in a table, so are the crowds so consumed by a hunger for more signs of Jesus' power that they fail to see what Jesus is offering them.

The crowds were pressing Jesus with questions... remembering back to another time when they were offered bread from heaven – manna. After their escape from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites wandered through the desert as they sought the promised land. They grumbled against their leader Moses, complaining, "In Egypt, we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve." You can almost hear them whining... what do you mean there is an hour wait for a table? Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you."²

The people of Israel called the bread manna. This bread of heaven sustained them for 40 years in their wandering and their searching. Fast forward to the crowds following Jesus...here is a man who feeds 5000 people with two fish and five barley loaves. The crowds are seeking to understand who this Jesus is – they want something convincing – another sign, more manna. And Jesus said to them, "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, but I am the bread of life." Jesus challenges the crowds – and us – to go deeper – yes physical food is important, but there is more. A deeper nourishment. In verse 27, Jesus calls this nourishment "the food that endures for eternal life."

I was struck by one commentator who noted that Jesus does not say, "the food that gives you life after death," but rather eternal life. For Jesus "eternal life" is a mode of intimate, mutual indwelling with God that can begin here and now, well before death." Eternal life means a life of intimacy with God that transcends time altogether, in that sense a "timeless" life of grace.³

After all isn't that what we hunger for? To be fed the bread of life that deepens our trust in God, that shapes our life so that God abides in us, as we abide in God. It is so easy for us to get disconnected from this "living bread" – the distractions and busyness of life are real and pull us away. And I also think that sometimes it feels safer to stay where crowds are, asking for signs of who Jesus is or wanting statements about the claims Jesus makes – statements that can be verified or disproven. Instead, what Jesus is asking of us is relational. Jesus is asking us to bring our whole selves, our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our hopes, our dreams, to him so that we might have eternal life right now, not just when we die.

Jesus offers us the gift of living bread - the bread of life. And we have a choice in how we respond to the gift. We can wait until our name is called, waiting for the table of joy which awaits us. Or we can experience eternal life here and now while we await the joy that lies ahead. As we share in the Agape Meal this morning, I invite you to give thanks for this bread of life and to trust and believe in the words of Jesus, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Let us come to Jesus and feed on this bread of life. Join me in prayer.

² The story of manna in the wilderness is told in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11

³ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-christian-lectionary>