

**Take, Eat... All of You**  
Sermon by Shari Halliday-Quan  
Sunday, August 20, 2017  
All Souls Church, New York City

This is not the sermon in which I invite you to consider becoming vegan. With all due respect for vegans, this is the sermon in which I encourage the omnivores among us to consider sitting on the floor and eat cold cuts with our friends. For those whose ethical eating commitments do not allow this, it need not be cold cuts. I suggest eating almost anything at all with your friends. Or even your family. And you don't even have to sit on the floor.

Americans eat over half of their meals alone, including about a third of dinners taken alone plus the many lunches eaten at desks during the workday. The reasons cited included factors that are documentable, quantifiable like Americans have longer commutes and longer hours at work. The reasons given also include general statements of dread like, "Well, obviously the social fabric of American life is unravelling." Here in New York, we are no strangers to working hard—by which working too long and too much—as well as grand statements about ushering in the decline of civilization. So I would guess that the incidence of solo dining is even higher here. After all, most of us are intimately acquainted with the deep loneliness that sometimes creeps upon us when we feel surrounded by literally millions of people and yet alone. Or stated less grimly, we tend to be pretty busy.

Perhaps you are sitting here wondering about the outrageous audacity, the incredible nerve I must have to preach now about food as the world turns so fitfully.

There are neo-nazis.  
There is the threat of nuclear  
war. There is so much  
going on.  
Who can focus on this?

Even the good stuff, the stuff of wonder and awe in our world this week, has nothing to do with food.

Tomorrow there will be a celestial event that is the stuff of prophecy and power.  
The moon will blot out the sun.  
Even in New York where we won't get a full eclipse, the sky will go dark.

This is the type of thing that shake civilizations and topples kingdoms. It probably won't do that here, no matter how much we wish it.

This is the type of thing that causes us to look up and pay attention.

And then we will go back to work or go home or go somewhere else, and later that day, most of us will eat. Most of us will eat alone.

I say this not to shame those of us who live alone or take many of meals by ourselves. Dining alone at a restaurant strikes me as an especially pleasurable activity when chosen. I appreciate that the stigma of a "table for one" has, I am told, declined in recent decades, but it still feels, to me, slightly transgressive.

There is an intentional quality when I sit down at a café that seems somehow different than when I eat alone at my desk or at home or at some counter in the bowels of Penn Station. Sometimes—like when we could join a coworker for lunch but instead just want to quickly write a few emails while scarfing down a sandwich—sometimes we have a choice. At other times, some of us do not have this choice so readily. I think of the subway etiquette ads. I like the ones that ask us to keep our hands, legs, and packages to ourselves. I do not much care for the one that insists that we not eat on the train. This always felt like an impossible admonition when I commuted between two jobs, my dinner “half-hour” sandwiched between them.

Even those emails that keep us from lunch, which I so coolly dismissed a moment ago, are not unimportant. Lots of us do work that we are proud of or have lives full of things that we care about. Our choices are limited by reality. When you walk in the door after a long day at work or come home from a protest or even something at church, who has the time and energy to pull out candlesticks, iron the table linens, and cook a gourmet meal for eight? No one. OK, probably someone, maybe even someone here sitting among us like a Martha Stewart superspy secretly, just pretending to be a regular person. But, really, not most of us.

The terribly irony is that just like being alone while surrounded by lots of people, we are hungry for the connection of food while being surrounded by a food-obsession culture. Unlike many people around the world but also right here in New York, most of us in this room have plenty to eat. Almost any ethnic cuisine just a subway’s ride away. Name a celebrity chef. They probably have a restaurant here. People line up for hours to try the trendy new food and showcase it on social media, only to sometimes apparently not even eat it. In recent years, at any given time, there’s at least one food delivery service running an ad campaign on public transit. Flip through the channels or scroll through whatever online services you use to watch TV, and you’ll come up with a cooking show before long. Some of us spend a lot of time watching those recipe videos on Facebook—you know, those ones with the camera above the food and the disembodied hands. There are so many of those videos. Services like Blue Apron or Hello, Fresh—I am sure there are others like it that apparently didn’t pay me for product placement in this sermon—offer a sort of half remedy to this dilemma of being hungry, not only for calories, but also the act of creation. These services deliver pre-packaged ingredients along with recipes to your door ready to be assembled, promising the possibility of gourmet cooking every day.

The truth is probably that all of that has ruined us. Something new and different every day is a sham that makes eating together more difficult. We are not better off for it.

I was raised with the help of my Chinese grandmother who took care of me and my sister and my younger cousins, while our parents were at work. I am half Chinese and half white, mostly German and English and Scottish, and like me, my cousins are multiracial. Eager for the multitudes contained in this hybridity, my cousins craved novelty in their food—although really, I think they just wanted mac and cheese. They would complain to my grandmother, “Chinese food again?” My Chinese grandmother would fix them with a steely stare and a tone of mock confusion. Her response: “Do you mean...food?”

The truth is that my grandmother’s cooking was really good, and it is in no small part thanks to her that I love to cook. I love to cook elaborate meals. And I am part of the problem.

The expectation of gourmet meals or elaborate, inventive dishes alongside the often self-imposed standards of what we expect our lives and homes to be like have driven us apart at meal time. As New Yorkers, many of us meet for meals in restaurants. Time and money might place restrictions on this, but our apartments are too small, we cry.

Maybe you don't have a dining room table. Maybe yours is covered in books.  
Maybe you store your shoes in your oven.  
Maybe your landlord hasn't fixed your oven and had been avoiding you.

Whatever the reason, I've been reading for decades that the dinner party is a dying art.

And we are hungry. Hungry not just for calories but for the psychic, social, and spiritual sustenance that comes from eating together. Cultures and religions around the world have known the power of eating together for millennia. The act of eating together contains the power to create and maintain communities.

I spent last summer in a Buddhist monastery in China. We would gather to eat meals with the monks—the actual monks who had dedicated their lives to living in the sangha, in the community—not just the tourist monastics like myself. Silently we would process into the dining hall, sing together a chant to begin the meal, and then sitting at long wooden tables in rows facing the center, we would eat our meal entirely in silence. I had a similar experience of eating silently alongside other people while visiting a Benedictine monastery closer to home. In silence, we entered together. In silence, we served each other food. In silence, each mouthful of food was carefully considered with gratitude and a sense of our interdependence.

A Seder meal with ritual elements and the collective telling of the Passover story teaches young people and guests about the history and heritage of the Jewish people. The meal serves as an anchoring reminder of a shared identity and struggle for liberation.

The night before Jesus was arrested, condemned and executed, he gathered for a meal with his friends. While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;

These words often continue in Christian services with the celebration of the eucharist or communion. While there is great variation in what people might believe is happening during communion, the ritual of eating together remains important and impactful in many people's spiritual lives.

The power and impact of this eating together is offered to us, all of us. For some with disordered eating or medical dietary restriction, the anxiety of eating with others brings an immense amount of pain. I have hope that there are possibilities for all of us and that will require a deeper imagination. But for most us, the concerns that keep us from eating together are less extreme. We don't have enough space or time or money or friends who we feel comfortable inviting into our homes.

But we are hungry for the intimacy and connection of inviting others into our home and being invited into their homes.

We are hungry to offer and receive hospitality and generosity. It need not be grand.

It really can be sitting on the floor eating a plate of cold cuts.

It really can be delivery beef with broccoli and you can set out candles anyway.

It really can be inviting folks over to see what can be whipped up with what's in the fridge.

It really can be a delicious one pot stew that's been cooking all day, but everyone has to sit

on the floor because you don't have a table.

Eating together, even at Passover or silently in monasteries, even as it becomes ritualized and familiar, both reinforces what we already value and opens us up to the possibility of something new. That we take in food and are thereby able to continue living is an everyday miracle. For those of us who don't farm our own food, there's an opportunity to think of the incredible interdependence. Even if we are not in the habit of saying grace before eating, we would do well to take a moment to think of the many hands and hard work that make possible our eating.

Something shifts when we are able to eat together with genuine hospitality and humility. Here at All Souls, through your Friday Soup and Monday Night Hospitality programs, you serve meals to hundreds of people each week. After eating, guests talk—with social workers as well as with each other. Sharing food provides an entry point into also providing other types of ministry, a listening ear and connections to other social services.

Sharing food is part of the necessary work for the changing of our world. When the world seems cruel and change is necessary, not everyone can be out in the streets protesting. But protesters like to eat.

Immigrants like to eat. Black and brown people like to eat. Trans people like to eat. Poor folk like to eat. Your racist relatives like to eat. Sharing food with those whose lives are impacted by oppression and injustice is part of the work of building community, and sharing food with those whose opinions you do not share and with whom bridges might be built is also part of the work.

On a final note, perhaps you have been sitting here thinking “Well thank goodness I am married or partnered, or in some other way, often have a dining companion.” Great, I'm glad for you! Do you like that person? Do you enjoy spending time with them over a meal? If so, even better. I'm so very glad for you. What this might mean is that you have someone to do the dishes when you invite other people over. Let those of us who are blessed, bless the world.

Take, eat, all of you.