Shared supper

by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson in the April 20, 2010 issue

When I was a child and the lectionary rolled around to passages about clean and unclean foods, kosher and not, Pharisaic daintiness and gentile appetites, I concluded that the bizarre past was intruding on the normal present. The idea that you could judge and be judged by what you ate was as alien as any other item in the Levitical code. Jesus said, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him” (Mark 7:15), and that was that.

Times have changed. A long-lost ethical flashpoint is finding new life in the realm of food. The terms proliferate: vegetarian and vegan are joined by pescetarian, pollotarian, flexitarian and raw foodist. Add a radical political dimension to get a veg anarchist. Meanwhile the pedigree of foodstuffs is assured by labels of fair trade and organic, or the slippery “natural,” although the righteousness of any of these can be disputed if the food is not also local, reducing food miles and carbon footprints. Individual foods go through cycles. Lard was once the bête noire of cholesterol, shunned in favor of margarine until margarine revealed its true colors as a smuggler of trans fats. High-fructose corn syrup poisons innocent schoolchildren while superfoods like kiwis, quinoa and açaí whisper promises of longlasting if not quite everlasting life. Suddenly the food hysteria of the Pharisees is neither so bizarre nor so past.

Typical of our vitamins-and-minerals approach to food, of our attempts to itemize and atomize each ingredient in a rigid cost-benefit analysis, is the loss of food’s power to unify the community. To be more precise, communities form around food specialties that are premised on the exclusion of others who fail to meet the moral standard. With both science (it’s full of omega-3s!) and ethics (it supports impoverished farmers!) wielding their big guns, what chance does a festive Sunday pot roast have?

In the nascent Christian community, Peter comes home to Jerusalem and is immediately confronted by his brothers for doing something morally and gustatorily vile—eating with uncircumcised gentiles. The food might have been sacrificed to idols or on the do-not-consume list. What could have possessed him?

It turns out that nothing less than a vision from God was required to overturn this longstanding barrier—a vision repeated three times in succession lest there be any suspicion in Peter's mind that it was the work of some interloping deity. A blanket descends from heaven filled with "beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air." As Peter gazes upon it, likely with a queasy stomach, the unmistakable voice of God commands him: "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." As usual Peter thinks he knows better than the Lord. "By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But his scruples turn out to be an impious refusal of God's own creation. "What God has made clean, do not call common," comes the reply. The threefold vision is reported in Acts 10 as well as in Acts 11. There's hardly a clearer command in scripture: "Kill and eat."

But it's not just that Peter's good religion casts aspersions on shrimp; his good religion casts out other human beings. For at the very moment the vision ends, three men from Caesarea arrive—gentiles. They too have had a vision: they are advised to seek out one Simon named Peter who holds a message that will lead their whole household to salvation. Peter's queasiness at the sight of the gentiles probably matches his queasiness at the sight of gentile foods, but the Spirit is no respecter of nauseated stomachs and orders Peter to go with them, "making no distinction." Peter has barely begun his proclamation about Jesus the Christ when the Holy Spirit falls on the gentiles "just as on us at the beginning." Recalling that Jesus would baptize not with water but with fire and the Holy Spirit, how could he fail to recognize the repentance leading to eternal life happening before his very eyes? He almost missed this incredible, unforeseen, astounding opening up of the gospel of Jesus Christ because he sneered at those pigs in a blanket.

Food is not merely symbolic. It's either the common sustenance of the community or the cause of division. The truth is that there's always some good reason (religious, ethical, economic, political) to refuse someone else's food, but God rejects those good reasons. When Peter tries later to have it both ways, avoiding a meal with gentiles for fear of the circumcision party, he finds himself charged by Paul with distorting the gospel itself. The shared supper is the centrifugal point of the Christian community. Whenever someone's habits endanger it—whether by gorging while others starve, or by passing judgment on the cleanness of their dinner, or by refusing their hospitality—the community itself is threatened. Either you share in the church's potluck, in whatever's on the table, or you don't share in the body of Christ at all.