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## **Sacred Feast: Eating, Feeding, and the Future of the Church**

The church is changing. Our ways of thinking about food are changing. How do these two new (?) phenomena relate to each other and to us? Join us and Sara Mackey as we consider these questions.

Not long ago, a young woman I know made a somewhat defensive (I thought so, anyway) statement about being an atheist. I told her, to her dismay, that she was one of the most religious people I know, and I pointed out that she loves cooking and serving food, she chooses healthy ingredients and grows much of what she cooks, and she eats low on the food chain. Her vocation is feeding people, and she treats her employees fairly and kindly. She loves her neighbor and cares for the earth and its gifts—what could be more faithful than that?

My young friend and many of her contemporaries insist that such ethical concerns have nothing to do with religion, and because I'm a peace loving soul, I don't challenge them with the suggestion that they who have rejected "religion" since childhood don't actually know what religion really is, and don't have the necessary background to critique it. They also have no idea that the church they rejected long ago is no longer the same church—in fact, the church they, and many of us, rejected so long ago is very slowly re-inventing itself. I predict that its radical transformation is going to be molded by people just like these young people.

Phyllis Tickle, a religion writer who calls herself an observer of religion, writes about this transformation which is identified as a movement known as the Emergent Church. Every five hundred years, Phyllis Tickle relates, the church cleans out its attic and has a huge rummage sale, and we are in the midst of one of those rummage sales right now. Often people think of the Emergent Church by identifying it with rock bands and mega-churches, and there's good reason for that; those relatively new phenomena

are some of the most visible evidence that the church is changing. That's not the whole picture, though, by any means. This five-hundred-year rummage sale of the church does not happen in a vacuum—the whole of society is involved in the change. For us in the twenty-first century, the Emergent Church is inextricably tied to the way communication, technology, transportation, social roles, the economy have all changed rapidly. As the culture changes, the church is bound to change as well. I believe that part of this emergent way of thinking is related to food, the meaning of food in our culture, and the role food played in the ancient church. I believe that the ethics and theology of food could be the gateway, so to speak, for those who have given up on the church to begin to think about coming back.

One reason I say this is because so many young people in my experience have a very different relationship with, and understanding about, food from what my generation had. They respect food more. They prepare it carefully and joyfully, understanding the relationships among various kinds of food in ways that I never did. I see people of all generations being more interested in growing their own food. I see a resurgence of interest in backyard chickens so that people can provide themselves with eggs in a way that they know is humane and responsible. My niece tells me about a friend of hers who opened a butcher shop in Brooklyn, and he has a following because he is careful about choosing where all his meat comes from and how it's raised. He does all of his own butchering, to make sure the process is done with compassion and care.

In Richmond, I read about a program called Tricycle Gardens, (supported, incidentally by churches and by the seminary where I work) in which urban gardens are established in areas known as food deserts in the city. The gardens are planted, cultivated, and harvested by residents whose main source of food is convenience stores. In an East End Richmond after school program (again, church-supported) for underserved children, staff and volunteers help the children raise vegetables, learn to cook, and keep bees, all within the boundaries of an area known to the privileged world as “the projects”. The staff had an idea that involved asking area restaurants to save for them the big buckets that pickles come in. Once they gathered enough pickle buckets, they planned to give every family who had a child in the program a “stoop garden”—

enough soil and seeds to raise a couple of tomato plants, some lettuce, just a few vegetables, but fresh food for the family, raised in a bucket on the front stoop. I don't think the idea ever came to fruition, but it's out there now, and it might happen one of these days.

Backyard chickens, humane butcher shops, stoop gardens—what does all this have to do with the church? In my imagination, at least, this is what the future of the church looks like once the attic is cleaned out and the rummage sale is spread out on the Universe's sidewalk. The church as you and I know it is never going away—the Catholic church did not disappear after the Protestant reformation—but it's going to expand, shift, and sometimes erupt. We don't even have to speculate about the *future* of the church, though. Let me tell you about what goes on in the church that I *currently* attend, where I may be nourished with an excellent vegetarian dinner tonight. It's Saint Stephens Episcopal Church, a one-hundred-year old, large, wealthy church. It's a very traditional Episcopal congregation by day, but I attend the evening service, called the Celtic service, where the church demonstrates its emergent characteristics. The Celtic service was designed for people who had given up on church, or who were feeling the need for something other than what they were getting from their regular worship. When they planned to introduce this alternative service, the clergy researched what people did not like about church, and left that out. People said the sermons were too long and boring, so in this service, there is no sermon. Instead there's a five-minute reflection offered by a member of the congregation or a member of the staff. People didn't like being asked for money, so no offering plate is passed. People didn't like the traditional church organ music, so the music at this service is varied, and peaceful. Many of the people who attend this service have already been to worship at their own churches in the morning; they come to the Celtic service for something that they're still looking for.

In addition to the Celtic service, another aspect of St. Stephens's emergence is its wellness ministry; as part of that ministry they began a farmers' market four or five years ago in the parking lot on Saturday mornings. As of this week-end, the market will now be year-round. From December through April it will go indoors, but it will keep offering fresh food and other home-made items to people in the community.

People in the community—that is a key concept for this congregation, and for the Emergent Church. My hope is that church is going to become much more concerned with who is in need and less concerned with who “belongs”. The focus at St. Stephens extends beyond their walls to include those who do not participate in the life of the church, but whose needs are most certainly the church’s business. Volunteers run a food pantry every Monday, where they give away bags of groceries to whoever comes through the door, and many of the vendors at the Saturday farmers’ market donate what they don’t sell so that the church can give it away on Mondays. On Sunday evenings, other teams of volunteers gather to make dinner following the evening service, and much of the food that’s used to make the meal is purchased from the Saturday market. Every week during announcements the person who’s officiating extends an invitation to dinner and explains that donations are accepted to cover the cost of the food. If you have enough to pay for yourself and somebody else, that would be great, we’re told, and if you don’t have enough to spare, come and eat anyway. Invite your friends, says the rector. They don’t have to come to church, just come and eat with us.

One of my friends attends a different church on Sunday mornings, and she has begun to attend St. Stephens in the evening. We don’t worship together, though; she comes to the kitchen while I’m in the sanctuary. A few weeks ago, while I was a chalice bearer, serving wine during the symbolic meal of communion, she was in the kitchen chopping vegetables, preparing a literal meal for a hundred hungry souls. She has told me how good it feels to produce something at church, to be part of an organized, efficient effort that ends up creating a delicious, healthy meal. Last Sunday I ran into her as I was leaving worship, and she said come on and eat; I’ll eat with you. So we filled our plates, sat at an empty table, and were immediately joined by others behind us in line. Breaking bread with strangers—what an ancient and deeply religious thing to do! Oddly enough, as we began to talk, it turned out that just because we didn’t know each other, that didn’t mean we were strangers. One man was my former pastoral care professor from Union. When he came to the table, he introduced himself, and I said, “I was just thinking how much you looked like Bill Arnold!”

“There’s a reason for that,” he answered. I told him I had seen him in worship before and thought he looked like my old professor, but I thought he had moved away. “I did,” he said, “but I came back.” The next couple who sat with us were a man who had grown up near where my friend’s parents live, and a woman who knew someone my friend used to work with. Our conversation was rich with laughter, recollections, and reflections about why we felt drawn to that evening service, and all of it was sustained with good food prepared by volunteers in service to the church. Everyone at the table except me had already attended worship that morning at their own churches, and had come to St. Stephens that evening for something more. My friend talked later about what she means by the word God—it’s what happened at that table, she said, with the connections that were already there without our knowing it, with what we shared, with what each of us had brought with us to offer to the others. Yes, I agreed, that’s exactly what God is—God is relational.

Food with strangers—food *for* strangers...that’s an ancient religious concept, ancient before Jesus walked the earth. Sharing food with strangers often meant the difference between life and death, and God reminded the Jewish people that they had an obligation because they were once strangers in a strange land. Jesus had many ways of disturbing the social and political structure that he was part of, and one of the most radical was that he ate with the wrong people. Jewish law was very clear about who you could and could not eat with if you were respectable, and one of the complaints people made against Jesus was, “That guy eats with sinners!” In the Emergent Church, I predict that we’ll move forward by moving backward—back to the essence of what Christianity was before the church got hold of it, back to eating with “sinners”; that is, feeding everybody, no matter who they are or what they believe.

At the heart of the Christian faith is this symbolic meal that represents to all who participate in it the unending love that holds us always. The sacrament of communion has been taken over by the church to such an extent that the real story has been hidden under layers of what’s right and what’s wrong, who can and who can’t. The real story is so powerful and so moving that it needs to be available to everybody, and I appreciate the fact that at St. Stephens the invitation is clear and it’s offered every week. The

sacrament of communion has been precious to Christians for two thousand years, we're told, so much so that at this church we want to share it with everybody. So whoever feels moved to come is wanted at this table, wanted by God.

If we can get past what we've heard and learned over the years and just think about the story itself, we can appreciate the value of this invitation. That night that Jesus broke bread with his friends, they were sharing a Passover meal, a custom that was ancient before Jesus ever showed up. In the story, he knew he was going to be executed, and he knew that once he was gone the authorities wouldn't be that interested in his friends. He knew it was his last meal with them, and he told them, I want you to remember. Don't you ever forget: I'm with you, this love is always for you, whether I'm alive or not. Don't you ever forget. And to make sure you always remember, I want you to look at this bread—imagine it's my own body, and any time you eat, remember me. See this wine? Imagine it's my own blood, and whenever you drink, remember me. Remember this love that is always with you and is never going away.

What if we, the church, could convince people of that? What if we could convince any person we see who's hungry that that love is real, and it's with us and among us and for us? For them? What if we could convince them by feeding them, no strings attached? What if we could help them repair their homes after floods or storms? What if we could find safe, enriching places for their children to go after school while they're at work? What if we could do all that and more in the name of the church, because we can never forget that love, that's always there and always enough and never goes away? Would that be a miracle?

So may it be.