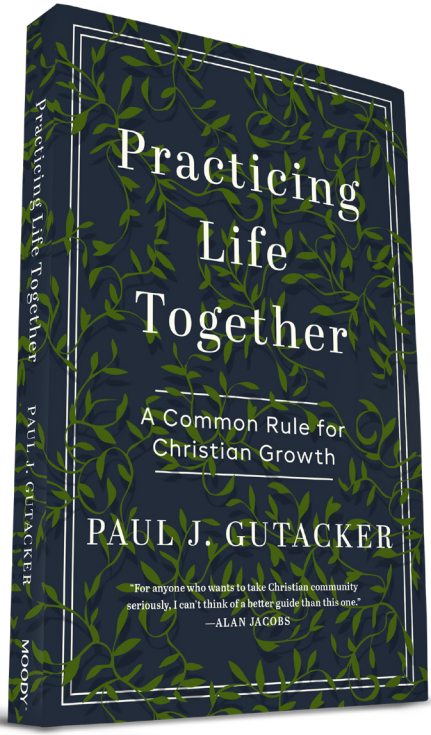

Christians don't have to go it alone during the formative years after college—nor should we. Gutacker introduces practices we can take up with others—communal prayer, weekly dinners, studying together, and Sabbath—in the hope that these life-shaping habits will cultivate genuine community and growth.

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O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in the fullness of his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Collect for the Wednesday of Easter Week, the *Book of Common Prayer*

1

Breaking Bread
Life at the Table

I assume that you, my reader, are embodied. You hold this book in your hands, resting an elbow on a desk or table, taking in the printed (or digital) page with your eyes. You, in other words, encounter this book as an embodied creature.

Let's take a moment to notice this basic fact: At the end of this sentence, close your eyes, and focus on your body for sixty seconds.

Okay. What rhythms did you feel? (Your eyes, I take it, are back open.)

Perhaps you noticed your breath, one of the most obvious rhythms, as you inhaled, exhaled, and repeated. As if to the beat of a silent metronome, your lungs draw in air and push it back out. Similarly, your heart tick-tocks, pulsing blood forward and back, inch by inch, through your veins. Your body is keeping time—it's in rhythm.

We could name many other rhythms. Your eyes blink, again and again. When you speak, you do so in a rhythm of sound and silence. Several times a day, smell and taste work in tandem to awaken and focus hunger, helping you replenish your body with food. Every evening, fatigue starts to shut your body down—not all the way to the unconsciousness of death, but something strangely like it. Every morning, you return to wakefulness.

Moment by moment, day by day, we live in rhythm. We live in a world of order and patterns and find our bodies in step with these rhythms. If the natural world is ordered by seasons, by cycles of renewal and decay, growth and death, likewise so are we. Put another way, all that we discussed in the previous chapter about the passing of time is experienced in our bodies. You might say that our bodies are "timed," or perhaps that we embody time.

Yet, if our embodied existence is meant to be in rhythm with an ordered world, it often struggles to keep the beat. Our intentions, our desires, so often seem out of step with our bodies. Our experience of time feels fragmented and incoherent. We weaken, we fatigue. We nod off when we mean to be alert; we lie awake when we wish to be asleep. We fidget, bounce, tense up. We struggle to focus, our minds wander, we think ahead. We forget things we mean to remember. We can't stop recalling something we'd rather forget. We lose patience, we get irritable. We feel discomfort, itchiness, aches, pains. We experience much confusion in our bodies. The passage of time only seems to make it worse, as our bodies change, decline, and decay.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul laments the disorder we experience in our bodies:

> I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my

> members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:21–25)

In the next chapter, he names the longing we so often feel: "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:25).

Like Paul, we find ourselves fragmented, dispersed, scattered, pulled in different directions. Our bodies seem to be a real problem. Even now you might notice your bodily experience getting in the way of reading—that whatever fatigue, pain, hunger, or restlessness you presently feel seems to prevent you from immersing yourself in these words. It's difficult to bring all of who we are, body, mind, and spirit, to *attend*.

And if you're like me, these bodily distractions are especially noticeable when trying to pray. Precisely because of the discomforts and limitations of embodiment, I find it difficult to simply *be present*—to fully inhabit a moment. And prayer, as it turns out, only happens in the present. It would be tempting to conclude that I'd be better off, at least when it comes to prayer, if I didn't have a body at all.

Is this true? Is embodiment an obstacle to prayer?

Do our bodies only get in the way of our spirituality?

How do we deal with the confusion we experience in our bodies, the difficulties we have inhabiting time?

THIS BODY OF DEATH

One way of solving these difficulties is to say, yes, the body is a problem to be escaped. This "solution" was perhaps the most significant—and most dangerous—of the early Christian heresies: Gnosticism. In the early second century, Gnostic preachers made a persuasive argument: Isn't embodiment the root of all our problems? Don't our worst inclinations arise from bodily shortcomings, bodily desires? Wouldn't our souls be free to pursue the Good, the True, the Beautiful, if they were rid of all the messiness, all the distractions, of the body?

The church quickly recognized that this ideology failed on several counts. Gnosticism denied the goodness of creation; what's more, it couldn't fit with the central Christian claim about Christ: that in Jesus, God took on human flesh. (Some Gnostics, for example, taught Docetism, or the notion that Jesus only *appeared* to take on human form.) Against the Gnostics, the church fathers vigorously defended the goodness of the body.

The witness of the early church is clear: Neither our bodies nor our finitude are design flaws. We were made to be embodied creatures. What's more, our bodies are destined for resurrection. Put another way, the spiritual life is not about ignoring our bodies or escaping their limitations.

Worship in the early church was very much embodied—it was remarkably *physical.*

In fact, when you look at the early church, you notice how worship was very much embodied—it was remarkably *physical.* Because "God is known in a human being who could be seen and touched," early Christians cherished material things, things that could be held, seen, tasted, smelled, including "water and oil, bread and wine, milk and honey, and salt, the bones of the saints . . ."[1] One can hardly read about early Christianity and think that the church disdained materiality, though the mention of bones can sound freaky to us!

But even while affirming the goodness of the body, Christians recognized its difficulties. Our time-bound, embodied existence is God's design; we also experience it as broken, confused, marred by sin. So early Christians paid a great deal of attention to questions like these:

How are our bodies—with which we hunger, desire, grow weary, enjoy the comfort of embrace—involved in our spiritual life?

What gives shape and order to our experience of being embodied in time?

How should we discipline our bodies?

All of these questions came together around a rather everyday matter: food.

FEEDING, FASTING, AND FEASTING

Food plays no small part in the drama of God's people. The Hebrew Scriptures are replete with stories, guidelines, laws, and restrictions on when and what to eat. And Jews and Christians aren't unique in seeing food as spiritually significant. You'd be hard-pressed to find a religion or culture that doesn't include rules for eating.

That's because our way of eating is distinctively human. As Jewish philosopher Leon Kass notes,[2] there's something unique about human posture that shapes our eating. Animals approach the world oriented toward consuming it. They are effectively a tube—a hole on one end takes food in and a hole on the other expels waste. As animals move through the world horizontally, their vision shares the same line as their feeding tube. Think of a giant whale shark swimming through the ocean with its mouth gaping open—this is the orientation of four-legged animals. What they see is what they eat.

By contrast, Kass observes, humans have an upright posture. We don't move through the world as a consuming tube; our sight is perpendicular to our feeding hole. We see, decide, then eat. We have the ability to discern, to judge, to make moral and ethical deliberations about our feeding. And this explains the ways in which human eating is both alike and different from other creatures.

All animals feed—all consume other life in order to live. But, Kass points out, only humans feast and fast. Only humans deliberately go without food for a time, withholding from ourselves what we need; only humans feast, going to great lengths to make meals

much more elaborate and costly than is necessary. While humans eat because we must, we also do more and less than survival would dictate. And this seems to be universal—virtually every culture has its own set of feasting and fasting practices.

This insight of Kass's raises many questions. But first I must acknowledge that food isn't easy for many of us. Our relationships with food may be troubled by illness, allergies, and eating disorders. We may eat too much, or not enough, or lack access to healthy food. In a fallen world, we can't talk about feasting or fasting without talking about injustice, exploitation, and malnutrition. To one degree or another, each one of us has an imperfect relationship with food. We need to recognize this even while exploring the goodness and spiritual significance of eating.

How does it matter that humans are meant for more than just consuming in order to survive?

How might feasting and fasting require each other? How might they be two sides of one coin?

How might fasting help us avoid endless consumption and overindulgence?

How might feasting differ from gluttony? How might it correct a utilitarian approach to food, and thus to life?

And, to return to our bigger question about being embodied creatures, what, if anything, does our feeding, feasting, and fasting have to do with God?

RECOGNIZING GOD AT THE TABLE

Once you start looking for food in Scripture, you realize that meals are everywhere. In fact, it's rare to find a significant moment in the Bible that doesn't somehow involve a meal.

Consider: from Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree in the garden of Eden, to the Passover meal that precedes Israel's

exodus from Egypt, to the heavenly manna provided them in the desert, to the widow whose oil never runs out, to Christ's first miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, to the risen Lord cooking breakfast on the beach for the disciples, to the wedding feast of the Lamb in the book of Revelation. If you took a few minutes, you could think of dozens (hundreds?) of other examples of meals in the Bible.

The Bible gives plenty of instructions about food too: from Leviticus to Deuteronomy to the book of Acts to Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians. One could write entire books on allusions to food in the Psalms, or food in the Song of Solomon, or food in the Prophets, or food in Christ's parables. (Think of the lists you could make about thirst, water, wine, honey, oil, salt, grapes, milk, and so on in Scripture.)

Obviously, we can't possibly sum up all the ways in which food is significant in the Bible. But several themes are worth noticing.

First, meaningful things happen at the table. From start to finish, the story of Scripture is a story of eating. You might even go so far as to say that the story of God's people happens around the table. This is what you'd expect if Kass is correct, and our eating is profoundly connected to what it means to be human. And it's what we see throughout the Bible.

Second, to understand who God made us to be, we should consider our eating. The Bible doesn't give us a dietary plan. God's specific intentions for what and how we eat aren't entirely clear, especially since Scripture itself revises for Christians what had been expected of Israel. But it would be hard to read Scripture and come away thinking that our eating is spiritually insignificant.

So what's the significance of eating? What might we learn about ourselves and our relationship to our Creator from Kass's three kinds of eating (feeding, fasting, and feasting)?

Feeding reminds us of our complete dependence on God's

generous provision. We can't live without food. Our life continues because God has graciously made a world of abundant provision, a world with rich soil, sunshine, and rain, teeming with plants and animals that in turn give us life. Feeding reminds us that our existence is an ongoing gift.

Fasting teaches us that we live "not on bread *alone*." Our need for physical sustenance is real, but it pales in comparison to our need for God. When we voluntarily choose hunger for a time, or temporarily abstain from certain foods and drinks, we recall that our deepest hunger, our truest need, is for God.

Feasting reminds us that God has made us to share in His joy. Our redemption isn't just about getting out of the punishment we deserve. It's about so much more. This is why the end of the story is a wedding feast—a great celebration.

Third, gathered around the table, we become a people. You'll notice that most of the food-related stories cited are not about individuals. Many are stories of hospitality, of welcoming strangers, of God's provision for a community, or a family. This is why our common rule starts at the table: "We are what we eat," but also, we might add, "We become who we eat with." For this reason, people were scandalized by those whom Jesus was willing to join around the table. And this is why the early Christian community wrestled with similar questions: Who is welcome to pull up a chair? Who can sit with whom? What can and can't we eat? Who gets to eat first? These questions mattered because communities are formed around the table. It's where we learn who we are, where we belong, and what it means to be an "us."

Fourth, we come to recognize Christ across the table. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently surprises people with His table manners. He doesn't eat, drink, or generally behave in ways that people expect. He eats with the wrong people. He provides the best wine when any old wine would do. He acts like a servant, washing the disciples' feet.

He orders the disciples to feed a huge crowd without adequate provisions. He walks through walls and then eats a bit of fish to prove He's not just a spirit. He endorses Mary sitting at His feet instead of working as hostess. Again and again, Jesus subverts people's expectations at the table.

Often, it's at the table where we learn who Christ is—where we see what God is like. It's at the table where He serves us, where He plays both host and servant. It's at the table where we betray Him. It's at the table, thanks be to God, where He restores us.

And we see all of this around one particular table, in one particular meal: when Christ gives bread and wine to His disciples, and tells them to partake of His body and blood.

What happens at the Lord's Table? What's going on in Holy Communion?

How does this meal show us not only who Christ is but also what it means to be human?

How does this meal relate to becoming a people—being a community?

COMMUNION: EATING THE BODY, BECOMING THE BODY

I grew up in a church tradition that saw the Lord's Supper as a memorial—a chance to remember. Celebrated four times a year, Communion was always somber and quiet. I approached Communion as a time for personal introspection—it was about me and Jesus. Communion gave me a moment to reflect, while holding my individual plastic cup of juice and piece of bread, on my sin and Christ's work on the cross. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, Paul reminds us that we are to examine ourselves and not eat the bread or drink from the cup "in an unworthy manner."

I'm grateful for my experience in the churches I was raised in. But I've come to learn that there's more to Holy Communion. Both Scripture and early church theologians present Communion in *corporate* terms. In fact, the word *corporate* comes from the Latin *corpus*, or body. Let me explain.

In his epistles, Paul insists that what it means to be a Christian is belonging to Christ's body. This theme is especially strong in his letter to the Ephesians, where Paul writes that Christ and the church have been mystically joined—the two "become one flesh." In some mysterious way, the church *is* the flesh of Christ. Christ is the head, we are the body. So far, so good.

But just when you think you know what Paul means by "body of Christ," he uses it in another sense. In 1 Corinthians 10, he writes, "The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (vv. 16b–17). In the following chapter, Paul gives us the words of institution: Christ "took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you'" (1 Cor. 11:23b–24). Wait, hold on, Paul. Now it sounds like "the body of Christ" means the eucharistic bread. So which is it?

Then, in chapter 12, Paul switches back: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12).

What's going on? Why, in one breath, does Paul speak of the bread as the body of Christ, and in another use the same phrase to describe the church? How do these two different bodies relate?

The answer is simple: We become what we eat.

When we *receive* the body of Christ, given to us in some mysterious way in the bread, we are *made* into the body of Christ. When we eat the body, we become the body.

Once you see this, you can't unsee it, especially in the writings of Paul and John. And this same understanding of Communion was explicated by early Christian theologians from the Latin-speaking West to the Greek-speaking East: Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Athanasius, and more. Their view is summed up well by Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, in the early fifth century: "Through one body, [Christ's] own body, he blesses his faithful in the mystical communion, making them one body with him and among themselves. . . . For if all of us eat the one bread, all of us form one body. Division cannot exist in Christ."[3]

Other church fathers made the same connection between the body of Christ that we receive in Communion and the body of Christ that is the church. "What is the bread?" asks John Chrysostom, fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople. "The body of Christ. Not many bodies, one body. Just as the bread is made of many grains, but so united that the single grains disappear, although they indeed exist but without their differences being seen because of their cohering, so we cohere with one another and with Christ."[4]

What's the point? Communion *makes the church*. Communion heralds our joining to Christ not as separable individuals but by incorporating us into His body. Communion with Christ necessarily means communion with each other. When I receive the bread and wine, it's not just about "me and Jesus." It's about recognizing that we have become a new people.

This has all sorts of implications. Above all, it means that the Christian life, our life in Christ, is never alone. As theologian Jean-Marie Roger Tillard puts it, "The moment of the greatest intimacy with the Lord—since one becomes his body—is also that of the greatest solidarity with others."[5] Instead of living by and for ourselves, instead of self-sufficiency and self-absorption, we enter into a new mode of being, defined by communion, by giving ourselves to and for the other. In short, we become the humanity God made us to be.

When we come to the Lord's Table, we come as we are, with all sorts of difficulties and shortcomings. Often, we're distracted and tired, muddled or uncertain. In our own bodies, and in our communities, we feel fragmentation and confusion. We may feel lonely, misunderstood, heartbroken. To varying degrees, we feel alienated both from our own selves and from each other.

But our risen Lord prepares a table before us, serves as our host, and offers Himself as our meal. We, His guests, are transformed. We become what we eat, His body. And then every other meal is changed too, as each becomes an occasion for heartfelt thanksgiving to God and genuine communion with each other. Every other meal is fulfilled in, and transformed by, Holy Communion.

What happens at the Lord's Table doesn't stay there. At the table, we commune with the Lord and with one another. We leave the table as a community, as a body. We go forward to live out our shared life—a life constituted by each other.

What should this life look like? What characterizes this community?

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