

THE *Life* GIVING TABLE

Nurturing faith through feasting,
ONE MEAL AT A TIME



SALLY CLARKSON

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The Lifegiving Table: Nurturing Faith through Feasting, One Meal at a Time

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DISCIPLES AROUND MY TABLE

The Feasting-Faith Connection



*If the home is a body, the table is the heart, the beating
center, the sustainer of life and health.*

SHAUNA NIEQUIST

*The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain;
A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow,
And refined, aged wine.*

ISAIAH 25:6, NASB



Table-Discipleship Principle:

All table-talk discussions, love given, and beauty cultivated at our table are for the purpose of making real our Savior and calling those who share life with us to serve Him their whole lives.



CANDLES FLICKERED with the brush of the evening breeze floating through our Colorado deck, awash with the fragrances of geraniums and roses. It was a beautiful evening, and our table was beautiful as well. Multiple shades of green lettuce in our salad bowl provided a lovely backdrop for the dark-rose cranberries, salted and roasted mahogany pecans, stark-white goat cheese, pungent red onions, and chartreuse chunks of avocado sprinkled here and there. Twice-baked potatoes stuffed full with spinach and bacon adorned each plate next to sizzling chicken, hot from the grill. Crisp homemade whole-grain rolls shone with their glaze of butter. Sparkling cider bubbled in the cut-glass wineglasses.

The stage was set for the occasion of having all my young-adult children home together to celebrate my sixtieth birthday. And as is usual for us, we did our celebrating with a feast.

The excitement of being together once again spilled over into smiles and laughter, rousing conversation, and even tears as we celebrated, once again, what it meant to be *us*.

My firstborn, Sarah, was home after a summer as a teacher/counselor at an apologetics seminar at a Colorado mountain retreat center.

Joel, her musician/writer brother, was living in Los Angeles, trying to establish a career as a composer of film scores.

Nathan, our “outside the box” boy, was also in LA, working as an actor in TV and commercials and taking his first steps toward becoming a filmmaker.

And Joy, our cherished “caboose,” had just finished her freshman year at Biola University.

Clay, my husband, was there, too, of course—my beloved longtime partner in ministry, in business, in creating and nurturing a family. And beside him was our beloved, ever-present golden retriever, Kelsey, hoping for a few crumbs from our table.

“This is what I think of when I think of home.” Sarah smiled as she looked around at the bounty of treasured faces and favorite foods. The others nodded. And I couldn’t stop smiling as we sat down once more around the table that had always been such a source of life to all of us.

It happened again just last summer. Days before converging on our home for a family gathering together, both of my boys called me.

“Mama, I can hardly wait to get there.”

“What is your favorite expectation about coming home?” I asked each of them.

Both answered with almost the same words, even though they were now separated by two thousand miles!

“It is the feasting every night around the table with delicious home-cooked food, being each other’s best friends, talking about every possible subject and sharing in each others’ lives, needs, stories, and fun—that is my favorite part. I need *my* people. I want a place to belong. I miss playing with my pack.” (Since choosing our first golden retriever puppy years ago and watching her frolic with her little dog family, we have often referred to our own family as our “pack.”)

A Table Ministry

It’s no accident that they feel this way. Creating a lifegiving table in our home was a priority for Clay and me from the very beginning, and we both put effort and intention into making it happen. Actually, when I think of it, I was doing it even before I had a family.

As a young woman, I was captivated by the heart of Jesus—His compassion to see and meet the needs of those He rubbed shoulders with and His desire for many workers to carry out His loving purpose.

Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, “The harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.”

From the time I read that passage in college, I said a passionate yes to the call to follow Jesus into the fields of harvest. That passion to follow stayed with me and eventually prompted me to pursue mission work both in the United States and abroad—even behind what was then the Iron Curtain. And I quickly learned that my table was an effective tool for sharing my faith and building relationships with others.

As a single woman almost until age thirty, I hosted many people in my home for snack-meal Bible studies, celebratory holiday gatherings and dinner evenings with friends, picnics outdoors, and a procession of one-on-one sessions with friends over strong tea or coffee. Over the years I learned more and more about how to make my table a place where His life would be shared, His love offered, His encouragement given to anchor those around us and to provide hope in a dark world.

After Clay and I met and married, we felt that God wanted us to give ourselves as a couple to seeking ways to reach out into the harvest fields of our own lives to find those who longed for truth, who needed the love and forgiveness of Christ. We found that inviting people we met in our neighborhood, at work, and through friends into our home to feast at our table gave us many unthreatening opportunities to share His love with those who longed for it. And so our table was also a strategic place of ministry as we served His love and truth through sharing meals in a cozy environment.

This dynamic of faith and feasting—or perhaps faith *through* feasting—took on an added dimension when our children came along. When we had only littles, our approach to meals and snack times had to consider the individual personalities of our children, their love of delight, their short attention spans. But we still sought to make our table a place of influence. With a heart for mentoring and discipleship, I would whip up a meal, and Clay and I together would seek to capture the imaginations of our children and friends with table talk that inspired and stimulated conversation.

And we continued to do so through the years. Almost every night, without fail, we would gather round the dining table, light candles, turn on music—whether dinner was a simple bowl of soup or a beef roast

with all the trimmings—and we would participate in the comfort and pleasure of each other’s friendship over a meal shared together.

The soul satisfaction of belonging to one another, the anchor of commonly held traditions, and the understanding that our home was a sanctuary from all the pressures and storms of life—all these knit our hearts together into tight bonds that will not easily be broken. And all these we cultivated carefully through years and years of sitting down together, through multiple hours of cooking and baking and preparing meal after meal, through the disciplines of teaching manners and fostering conversation. Our determination to incarnate the life of Christ in every detail of our time together, even our meals, had forged a legacy of love.

Feasting, Family, and Faith

In all the years that the Clarksons have been a family, feasting together has been a lifegiving activity for us. And we’ve always *called* it feasting, whether it involves a full-blown banquet, a one-on-one treat of milk and cookies, or a bowl of fresh-popped popcorn enjoyed around the fire. The word *feasting* reminds us of God’s bounty, the gift of our relationships, and the response of pleasure and thanksgiving that the act of sharing a meal requires of us. Somehow it makes “eating” sound more significant.

When God created the world and pronounced it good, He lavishly provided an abundance of delights to please every possible palate. His artistic hand can be seen in all of the food He provided, not just to satisfy our basic need for calories, but also to gratify our senses with color, aroma, texture, and taste—orange carrots and red peppers, purple-black eggplant, rust-colored cinnamon, yellow and green squash, golden honey, sweet green and red and purple grapes, yellow and multicolored corn, brown rice and pale grains of wheat, pink sea salt, speckled trout, crunchy pecans and bumpy walnuts, rich maple syrup, mild hominy, spicy green and red chilies.

God created all these and more for our pleasure and our satisfaction. And He created us in such a way that we make emotional and spiritual

connections in the process of enjoying them, especially when we share them around the table with people we love.

Breaking bread together, sharing food, sitting at table eye to eye is essential to individual growth and relationship. Adults and children are not just bodies to be fed, but also minds to be challenged, hearts that depend on emotional input to survive and to grow as healthy human beings, and spirits that long for connection with God and purpose in life. Feasting together is a powerful way to fulfill physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Perhaps an exhausted, fussy toddler needs small snacks of chicken, nuts, fruit, or cheese to fuel his little body and settle his emotions. A hormonal teen might brighten up with a cup of coffee or tea, a hot piece of homemade toast awash with butter and jam, and a set-apart time together that communicates, “I am here to listen to your heart.” And for a stressed-out adult, there’s nothing like coming home to a pot of potato-cheese soup bubbling on the stove, bread warming in the oven, candles lit, the table set. (Thank you, Joel, for recently saving my own day!)

A Model for Discipleship

Feasting is not only a way to meet physical and emotional needs. It’s also a powerful tool for making disciples. And discipleship has always been the focus of my heart for my children. My longing for them to catch the love of Christ, the life of His Spirit, and the redeeming truth of His words was at the core of all of my planning and practices as a mom. And I learned long ago, from pondering Christ, how strategic shared meals can be to this purpose.

Biblical tradition underlines the physical, emotional, and spiritual significance of food and feasting. In fact, Jesus ushered in His ministry as our Messiah by providing new wine—the best of wine—at a wedding celebration. He also inaugurated His coming as our Redeemer in a setting of food and drink abounding. And the way He went about this can tell us a lot about how He would have us create our own lifegiving tables.

The final evening before Jesus was to be crucified, He strategically set the stage for His most profound messages to be shared with His inner circle. This evening, unique in Scripture, shows the God of all creation preparing a feast for His own.

He began with preparation. Jesus picked a room where the Passover meal would be celebrated and then dispatched two trusted disciples to make the arrangements for the traditional feast. Luke 22:7-8 records Jesus' instructions: "Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread arrived, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John ahead and said, 'Go and prepare the Passover meal, so we can eat it together.'"

Preparation for a meal indicates thoughtfulness, caring, and intentionality. We show others their worth to us by considering how to best meet their needs and by intentionally arranging the environment to provide comfort and pleasure.

Then came the moment when Jesus assumed the role of a servant. His desire to pour out His love and affection to those who would eventually give their lives for His Kingdom purposes is shown clearly in His loving actions.

So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him. JOHN 13:4-5

Touching one another is a sign of personal intimacy, an expression of friendship, kinship, affection, or close connection. For Jesus to bow His knees on the dusty floor is a personal choice of deep humility. As tenderly as a mother comforting her children, He personally washed one hundred twenty dirty man toes and wiped rough, callused feet with all the love of a doting parent.

This unexpected act surely gave a surprise relief to those who had walked the dusty roads in the sweltering heat of the day. The flooding rush of therapeutic pleasure as their feet were massaged and wiped dry, the nerve endings soothed under the hands of their friend, soon to be

their Savior, must have been impressed on their memories forever. He, the Savior, had bowed to attend His closest friends, His beloved companions through years of ministry, and to minister to them with the intimate gift of touch.

Next came the food—the traditional Passover feast with the delectable aroma of herbs and spices wafting through the air. Hungry men must have eagerly gobbled up the familiar feast.

Because of Jesus' careful preparation, His loving service, and His provision to satiate the hunger of this gang of friends, His beloved Twelve were ready to hear the final words and admonitions He was about to deliver before He left them. Having their physical and emotional needs met opened the disciples' hearts to receive the Master's spiritual instruction. And seeing their Lord's profound model of humble servant leadership helped shape the direction their future ministries would take.

Communion of heart, soul, and mind was at the center of Jesus' aim for His last earthly evening with the band of men who had walked with Him through all the days of His ministry. And it all happened around a table. His years of discipling them, punctuated by many meals together, culminated with a feast they would always remember—a feast that His followers reenact to this day.

God's desire, you see, is always for intimacy and communion with His beloved children. The feasting table sets the stage for heightened intimacy with Him as He shares His heart, mind, and soul. Initiating love, providing enjoyment through delicious food and drink, sustaining hearts with words of friendship, granting hope, giving courage and comfort, and speaking words of life were all a part of His message in this last place He lingered with them on the night before He gave His life.

I believe this is the example we must follow if we want to cultivate disciples around our tables. Through our careful preparations, our attention to tone and atmosphere, our gifts of loving touch, our example of humble service, and the provision of satisfying food, we can bring ourselves and those we love closer to Christ and foster growth of body, mind, and spirit.

Your Lifegiving Table

To my delight, I have been able to watch as my own grown children carry what we have taught them about faith and feasting, food and service and discipling into their own homes and their own lives. I've also had the satisfaction of sharing some of my insights and experience with other men and women who hunger to gather around a lifegiving table and share their hearts. And now, in this book, I'd like to share them with you.

In the pages to come you will find personal stories, practical guidance, ideas to try, plus a little bit of Bible study to anchor you, and some practical ideas for creating your own lifegiving table. With each chapter I have suggested a table-discipleship principle to help keep you focused on the real purpose behind your own lifegiving table. And at the end of most chapters, I have shared a couple of favorite recipes that my family has enjoyed through the years.

Most of these recipes are family favorites—family tested and intended to please a broad audience. I have worked and traveled throughout the world and enjoyed a variety of sophisticated cuisines. But for this book, I've chosen my simplest comfort food—easy to make and tested crowd-pleasers.

My own habits of cooking involve what I call *real* food—food that has not been highly processed or prepared with lots of chemicals or additives—and I avoid anything that has been bleached, such as flour or sugar. I lived in Europe at a time when there was much less fast food available, so I learned the value and joy of doing my own cooking from scratch, which has become a sort of hobby for me. As I learned more about how food affects our bodies and minds, I moved more and more toward a natural diet. I try to cook with fresh, wholesome, organic ingredients and whole grains, and I strive to make food that is as healthy *and tasty* as possible.

A little shop in a market near my house in Austria ground kernels of wheat into flour, and I soon became hooked on the superior taste of baked goods made from freshly ground flour. So when I returned to America, I bought my own grain mill. I use it often to grind my own wheat or grains to make flour. I also invested in a heavy-duty Bosch mixer that allows me to make and bake our own bread easily and quickly.

All of this, you will find, is reflected in these recipes. But don't worry if you don't have some of the specialized equipment to follow them exactly. Just use the alternative ingredients and instructions given in the recipe. There is such freedom and grace for each of us to pick and choose how we will cook according to our own unique personalities, preferences, and dietary needs. Individual cuisine brings distinct life art to different tables. If the recipes in this book don't appeal to you, I hope you will take them as inspiration from our own family culinary preferences and either find or create recipes that work for your own version of the lifegiving table.

Although "cooking healthy" is important to me, you'll note that I've also included recipes for treats—some sweets and even my special fried chicken. They're not for every day—we usually reserve such goodies for weekend teatimes, holidays, or company meals. But we *do* enjoy them, and I hope you will too.

Whatever your specific circumstances, it is my sincere hope that this book will stimulate your own appreciation of how significant your shared meals can be in shaping the legacy of faith celebrated, embraced, and offered through the seasons of your own home. I also hope you'll feel free to use it any way that works best for you. This isn't the kind of book you have to read cover to cover, although you can do that if you want to. Each chapter is complete in itself, so you can read them in any order. If you're interested in a theological and philosophical groundwork for table ministry, start with chapters 2 through 5. If you're ready to start some new table traditions in your family's life, flip through chapters 6 through 14. Each chapter focuses on a specific aspect of table discipleship or a table tradition our family enjoys.

However you read it, I hope you'll learn, as we have, that your table can be one of your most potent discipling tools as well as a source of great joy in relationships. And may you be inspired to cultivate feasting in your own home as a powerful way of influencing the hearts and minds of your children, friends, neighbors, and even strangers with the sacrificial love and boundless servant heart of Jesus.

Bon appétit!