



Metro Lutheran  
Positive Parenting  
November 2009

## FAMILY DINNER: A HOLY SPACE

While they were eating, [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body"...

Mark14:22

So begins the most famous family dinner of all time, Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, which has become our sacrament of Holy Communion. Throughout the New Testament, there are stories of Jesus eating with others, always creating holy space. Remember Jesus eating repeatedly with his disciples, with friends like Mary and Martha, with Zacchaeus the tax collector, with the 5,000 men plus women and children who gathered to hear Jesus preach.

This same experience of holy space is available for our families daily, as they gather to eat with one another. Family dinner has the potential to be so much more than simply that activity essential to avoiding starvation. It can feed relationships and it can nurture faith, too. How can we transform this activity into one that builds our family and our faith?

First, light a candle. This is not about making it a romantic interlude, nor a declaration that the food will be fancy. This is a reminder that Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" and we have gathered in his name.

Second, say a table prayer. It can be a simple and heartfelt thank you for the food and companionship of those gathered. It can be memorized or spontaneous. It can be prayed from the heart of a little child, and sound much like their bedtime prayer. Teaching our children to be thankful to God is so important.

Third, use the time to listen, really listen to your child. Ask open-ended questions, the ones that produce conversation, not a one word answer or shrug. Try some of the following: What was your favorite thing that happened today and why? What was your biggest challenge today and why? What is one thing you learned today and why does that matter? If you had one day to do anything you wanted, what would you do and why?

Fourth, this is a wonderful opportunity to do a family devotion, whether doing it out of a devotional book, dwelling in God's Word together, or naming where you have seen the presence of Jesus today.

Actually, family dinner is a perfect way to practice all Four Keys, simple, daily faith practices that build faith in all of life together. You will certainly have much caring conversation, as you prepare dinner, eat together, and clean up. Devotions, whether simply saying a table grace, marking the presence of God in this day, or doing a deliberate devotion together, is such an easy thing to braid into the family meal. Lighting the candle can be your ritual. And all of preparation, serving, and clean up is service.

Family dinners offer even more gifts to our families. Columbia University in New York City hosts CASA, the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, which finds that frequent family dinners is a protective factor in preventing drug and alcohol abuse among teens. It also produces better academic results for youth. In fact, the one thing most Rhodes scholars have in common is that they eat dinner with their family. This is a more powerful predictive factor than a parent's academic accomplishments, family socio-economic status, ethnicity, or anything else.

Yet, only half of American families eat together regularly. Unfortunately, half of those, eat in front of television, where the screen, not the people present, is the primary presence in the room. So, experts advise, turn off all screens, face one another, and feed relationships and faith formation at the same time.

If you cannot do all of your evening meals together, begin with what you can do. If dinner is not a time when adults or kids are present, try doing a family breakfast or a family cocoa and cookie break before bedtime. Whether we break bread or pancakes or cookies, this time together is holy.

Blessings on your family meals.

### FAMILY ACTIVITIES

- Light a candle at dinner. Tell your family that this candle reminds us that Jesus, the light of the world, is present with us.
- Plan a dinner menu with your family, having at least one food that is a favorite for each member of the family.
- Cook together, sharing caring conversation, finding God present with you. It may become your new favorite tradition and is certainly
- an act of service.
- Cook extra for one of your dinners and either invite another person or family to join you or deliver a meal to someone who needs that special care.
- Use dinner together as a time to share your day, your stories, your concerns. Make sure that you check in with everyone at the table.
- Begin with a table grace and share one thing each of you enjoys about the family who is gathered.