

SUNDAY DINNER

When I was seven, Sunday dinner was always the same. It was as much a part of our religious rituals as putting on our best clothes, going to the little yellow brick church my father pastored, and kneeling to pray. I grew up thinking there was a direct correlation between roast beef and God.

The melancholy echo of the last “Amen” hung heavily in the air as I glanced at the big clock on the back wall of the church. It was ten minutes after 12:00 noon, and God was losing my attention. I heard my own deep belly grumbles and felt the adrenalin begin to pump. It was Sunday. Church was over. Thoughts of roast beef and mashed potatoes were already crowding out the shadow of the last call for sinners.

My father’s provocation was soon replaced by a second more urgent one: Who would I invite for Sunday dinner? I tried to avoid Mother’s grasp as I dove, discretely, to the back of the church. I had permission to bring a friend home for dinner. I would look for someone who liked to play my favorite game, Cowboys and Indians. Many of the doll-loving girls would make very boring companions. It was decision time, and this decision had to be made quickly as the parishioners, nodding and commenting on the power of the sermon, gathered their families toward the door. If the parents of my first choice disapproved, I would need time to make a second choice before they pulled away in the family car.

Having made my choice and settled with our parents, my friend-of-the-day and I played quiet “church” games and waited for my father to finish his pastoral duties of the day. We knew there were visitors to be greeted, saints to be counseled and Elders to be consulted. We periodically glanced up from our Tic-Tac-Toe competition to see how these activities were progressing, hoping for Mother’s signal that it was time to go. The hunger pains reminded us that it was

nearing one o'clock.

With Mother, my brother, my chosen friend and I all loaded in the car, my father would lock the parish doors and drive us home. The drive home was a challenge in self-control. Mother and Father liked to contemplate the morning accomplishments of the Spirit and expected us to quiet our animated discussions of the prospects of the day. Our excited whispers fell to silence. The silence brought us to contemplation. The contemplation brought us face to face with our hunger.

Looking back now, I am sure that this intense hunger played a leading role in the virtues of Mother's Sunday spread. Home at last, I entered the kitchen and my eyes were drawn to the stove in the corner. The beef roast smothered with potatoes and carrots she had put in the heavy iron skillet that morning were simmering slowly on the back burner. I held my breath as Mother went straight to the stove. My breath escaped simultaneously with a bursting vapor which puffed from the edge of the lid as she checked the meat. My friend and I sniffed the air, looked at each other and rubbed our tummies.

Mother motioned toward the stairs with her head as she replaced the lid. Our clothes must be changed first. We ran up the stairs and hurriedly sorted through the drawers until we found a play-dress that would be the approximate size for my guest. Then, play clothes donned, we raced back down to the savory invitation awaiting us.

Mother hovered over the table. She had already changed her clothes and set each place. Big bowls of meat and vegetables graced the center of the large table. She motioned us to sit and went to call Father.

The arrival of my father at the table brought an immediate hush. His somber expression, slow deliberate movements, and the low distant look of his averted eyes made me feel like I was back in church and his chair was the pulpit. As he sat heavily at the head of the table, I waited for the

sound of his usual low utterance, an aside, as if speaking to himself, “Thank...the Lord.” I felt like a ticket holder at the theater, awaiting the beginning of the first act, with my father, the actor, making his entrance, musing over something unknown to us, his audience.

Although my head was bowed, I peeked under lowered lids at the tempting mounds of steaming food, hoping the prayer would be shorter than the usual plea for the salvation of the lost souls everywhere. It was those Sundays when Father decided to specify whose lost souls were uppermost in his mind that I feared the food would take a chill before he had finished. The “Amen” was always gratefully echoed in my head as the signal to finally taste the delicious food.

Eating dinner required concentration on the art of getting enough to eat but making sure we did not take the last portion of any food. The person who finished off any bowl, was considered gluttonous and inconsiderate of others. Adults and guests were always served first and urged to take the biggest and juiciest pieces. Now as the big platter moved slowly from person to person, my eyes followed, my heart growing heavier with each succulent piece that was removed. When it finally passed to me and there was a big, juicy piece left for me, I glanced at my friend and smiled, for it was in that moment that I believed in God.