

CELEBRATE THE CHURCH: COME TO THE TABLE



THE LAST SUPPER – A TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE IN THE LIFE OF JESUS' DISCIPLES

Scripture:

Mark 14:12-15, 22-25

¹²On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' ¹³So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, ¹⁴and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' ¹⁵He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.'

²²While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

Luke 22:7-8, 14-19

⁷Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it.'

¹⁴When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'



COME TO THE TABLE

A friend of mine, Rev. John Koenig, teaches at the Episcopal Seminary in New York City and spent several months with his wife Elizabeth at the Berkeley Presbyterian Mission Homes while Alice and I were resident managers in the 1990's.

His recent book, entitled *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation*, reminds me of some of the meals I have been involved in with folks from Church of the Roses: lunch and coffee with Cushman every Friday, our Annual Meeting lunch last Sunday, breakfast with

Montgomery High School students every Monday, and the Roses University suppers, to name just a few.

SOUL BANQUETS

John Koenig says that The Sacrament of Holy Communion sets the stage for all of our meeting and eating and sharing together. As Rev. Koenig's book title proclaims, meals in our church such as those I've just mentioned are soul (s-o-u-l) banquets. To me this means that all of our meals are arranged and cooked and served and cleaned up by very important people in our congregation. You

know most of them by name and they join us today around the table of our Lord. These are very gifted people -- Dolores and Art Borchers, Gwen Christianson and Cheryl Cushman, our Montgomery High School volunteers, to name just a few, and they minister to us with meals so that we can minister to each other and to our community. Our times around the table together can help reveal to us our mission.

EVERYONE WAS WELCOME

Dr. Koenig writes: “Meals have occupied a central place in Christian faith and practice from the very beginning.”

**“Jesus loved to eat and drink
and in doing so he extended
the welcome of God’s reign
to all who dined with him,
especially those
on the margins of society.”
Everyone was welcome.**

I especially resonate with that last phrase, “everyone was welcome.” Surely this is the message we hope everyone will associate with our church and all churches. You have a place at our table; you are welcome here, and nowhere more so than at the symbolic meal of Communion, and in all the meals we share as hosts and guests, friends and strangers. Eating together we are able to feel God’s presence among us.

Jesus was convinced that the kingdom of God was coming into the world through his words and actions. That was the mission of his meals. Eventually all people, all nations, would come from east and west, from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God. People would be drawn from Jesus’ table to the great banquet table of God, and all would be welcomed. So we continue to pray: “Thy kingdom come,” and we can help this happen. Meals become mission. All are welcomed by the God of love. And our mission is to spread this Good News.

A PERVADING SPIRIT OF LOVE

Presbyterian elder Ann Weems, in her book entitled *Searching for Shalom*, has a poem entitled *This Church*. She writes: “We don’t pretend to understand the mystery of what goes on in God’s Church. We just know we feel a pervading spirit of love that reaches into all of us and pulls us out into the open, free and alive and belonging. I celebrate the Church of Jesus Christ . . . [where we] can gather together in His name and touch the world with the amazing good news that somebody cares.”

John Koenig writes about how we experience God’s presence at Communion: “Something happens to us in our deepest selves. Our very being and purpose for life are addressed, sometimes with a challenge to undertake new tasks. . . [and] we sense that we have been created for them. . .”

THE LAST SUPPER

Dr. Koenig continues: “The Last Supper, hosted by Jesus, was closely related to the meals that preceded it. [Gospel writer] Mark says that the coming kingdom of God will be a great feast. On the other hand, this meal [the Last Supper] was unique, not only because of the provocative words Jesus spoke over the bread and wine, but also because it occurred on the night of his arrest. The supper could never be remembered apart from reflection on the meaning of his death.”

As we look back on that Last Supper we can see that *this meal was a transformative force in the life of Jesus’ disciples*. These were his last words and actions before Easter, and as reported in Luke’s gospel included his poignant request to “Do this in remembrance of me.”

As we compare the story of the Last Supper in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we see that Mark reports that Jesus sent two of his disciples to prepare the Passover meal. Luke says Jesus sent Peter and John. Both Mark and Matthew suggest that Jesus startled his twelve disciples when he compared the bread to his body and the wine to his blood. He also began the meal with a shocking announcement.

Mark wrote: "When it was evening Jesus came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.'"

What a startling contrast -- a table where everyone is welcome and a guest at the table who betrays the host. And yet we have remembered the Last Supper down through the centuries as Jesus' invitation to the disciples and to us to come to the Table.

SISTER MIRIAM THERESE

Some years ago I had a very unusual experience during a trip to Southeast Asia to visit refugee camps. At one camp on the Thai-Cambodia border our small group from Church World Service was shown around by a small American woman, dressed in simple clothing. She took us through the hospital wards including one section for refugees with leprosy. We shook a few of their hands as we greeted them.

As the group moved on to another building I stayed behind with this lady and told her about my work resettling refugees in Central California. She said that she taught religion at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, and that she belonged to the Medical Mission Sisters and spends her vacations working in this refugee camp.

I said that I was familiar with the Medical Mission Sisters, who were well known for their songs, and that I especially liked "*Joy is Like the Rain*." Then she said, I am Sister Miriam Therese Winter, the head of the order, and that is a song I wrote.

What a complete surprise it was to travel thousands of miles and then meet the author of a song I had sung for years with youth groups. Before we left she invited us to lunch.

SACRAMENTAL MEALS

In her recent book, entitled *eucharist with a small "e,"* Sister Miriam Therese writes "Some of my most memorable meals have taken place in makeshift refugee camps far away from home. I have come face to face with famine ... in Ethiopia, and before that, in the sprawling camps along the Thai-Cambodian border among traumatized survivors of the Pol Pot regime. I have learned what it means to be hungry, really and truly hungry, and what a significant blessing it is when that hunger is overcome. After those searing experiences, the Eucharist (Holy Communion) has never been the same for me. I came to realize that [Communion] is at the very core of life whenever it is happening and reveals itself in our efforts to attend to another's needs."

Not too long ago we sang the hymn here in Church of the Roses, "O for a World," written by Sister Miriam Therese. "O for a world where everyone respects each other's ways, where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise. ... We welcome one world family and struggle with each choice that opens us to unity and gives our vision voice."

Just as Sister Miriam Therese calls her book *eucharist with a small "e,"* we could call **all of our meals** together here at church communion with a small "c." Every meal has a sacramental meaning.

Sister Miriam concludes: "Sacramental meals, sacramental moments permeate our lives, whether or not we know it. To know is to be receptive to the force of each meal's blessings and to be nurtured by the memory of that moment or that meal."

"It is good to come together for a meal with those who are close to us. It is also essential to invite to our table those beyond our inner circle, if we would change the dynamic of a [stranger-fearing] world. The meals we share with family and friends, with the passerby, with strangers, are like the table fellowship of Jesus."

CELEBRATING THE GOD WHO KEEPS PROMISES

Perhaps a further demonstration of sharing with our Jewish neighbors here in Santa Rosa, in addition to our joint celebrations of Thanksgiving, might be to sit together at table for a Passover Seder. As Dr. Koenig writes, "Interfaith meals may open up special opportunities for the maturing of our faith and our mission. What spiritual gifts, for example, might we give and receive as we sit [at Table] with our Jewish neighbors . . .? [Such meals] will turn out to be Soul Banquets!"

Dr. Koenig quotes Archbishop Rowan Williams who tells us that when we say the words of Jesus during the Lord's Supper, we continue His work, we take the place of Jesus as he prays to the Father and as he offers welcome to the world at his Table. Williams reminds us that Communion is the celebration of the God who keeps promises and whose hospitality is always to be trusted.

I believe that meals celebrated together are a source of nurture for our mission outreach in and for the life of the world. In fact, Communion reveals itself as God's welcome to the world. Jesus invites us to come to his table to receive the gift of God's grace and to empower us to share God's love wherever we find ourselves. As William Sloan Coffin has said, "Holy Communion quenches [our] thirst for hope."

He adds: "A church is a place where we try to think, speak, and act in God's way, not in the way of a fear-filled world. A church is a home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed."

A RENEWED SENSE OF UNITY

I was thinking this past week as I was writing this sermon of the need for a renewed sense of unity among us as we approach Holy Communion. To the extent that we follow Jesus faithfully and accept His invitation to come to the Table, we will be united in the bonds of love.

**If we work to protect this gift of oneness
which God gives us and if we
will not let anything divide us,
then Jesus will give us His joy
and nothing in the world
can take that away from us.**

Hearing and responding in faith to the call of God in Christ is to be sent out into the world to witness to Christ's redeeming love. Friends and members of Church of the Roses, we are not called to be successful in the eyes of the world; we are called to be faithful in the eyes of God.



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February 7, 2010**