

Oak Lane Presbyterian Church,
Philadelphia, PA
Maundy Thursday “Home Communion” Service
Thursday, April 9, 2020

“Where Is the *Lord’s* Table?”

I. The Prayer

O God, this night is filled with somber memories and fearful hope. We remember that we are made of clay, and that “all flesh is grass” (Isaiah 37:27), and we tremble. But when we remember that you are known to us through the scriptures and the fellowship of bread broken and the cup shared, we rejoice. May your presence fill our homes as it filled that home in Emmaus when, in the breaking of bread, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31). As you accept us in the eating of bread and the drinking of wine, help us, at our tables, to make the acceptance of ourselves and of each other complete – through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

II. At the Table of the Pharisee

Have you ever wondered if you belong at the table of the Lord? Well, Jesus, without hesitation, ate and drank with Gentile sinners, Jewish tax collectors, and dogmatic Pharisees. This openness on the part of Jesus, his acceptance of imperfect people, and his rebellion against social and religious barriers, shows us that we, too, are welcome at the table of the Lord.

Have you ever thought about what it means to offer food to someone, and to accept it from someone else? For one thing, sharing food implies recognition of another person as worthy of your time and attention. And because food is a necessity, to share it includes the acknowledgment of mutual need. Jesus, on this Thursday evening of Holy Week, permeated the food with meaning. No wonder the sharing of bread and wine at the Last Supper has become so central to our faith! Wherever Jesus ate, he also talked – to friends...to enemies...and to disciples. And so tonight we share some table talk with Jesus.

On one Sabbath, Jesus went to eat at the home of a leading Pharisee, where people watched him closely. During that meal, a man whose arms and legs were swollen came to see him. Jesus spoke up and asked the teachers of the law, “Does our law allow healing on the Sabbath or not?” But they would not say a thing. So Jesus healed the man and then sent him away. Then he said to the Pharisees, “If any of you had a son – or even an ox – that happened to fall down a well on a Sabbath day, wouldn’t you pull him out right away?” And all were silent before him (Luke 14:1-6).

Why was that whole crowd watching Jesus so closely? To see if Jesus would dare to break the Sabbath laws. *Everything* in that situation was covered by the Law of the Sabbath. Even the food for the meal had to be prepared the day before, and the meal itself was subject to a hundred different regulations! And healing on that day was expressly forbidden. But that is precisely what Jesus did. And Jesus never even asked the man with the swollen arms if he had ceremoniously washed his hands in the manner prescribed by law. At this table, Jesus rearranged people’s priorities. At this table, then, Jesus taught that regard for life, both physical and spiritual, comes before religious or legal regulations. It was an argument with which no one could disagree.

III. At the Table of Simon

On another occasion, a different Pharisee, one named Simon, invited Jesus to have dinner with him. As Jesus was resting on one arm to eat, a woman known to be “a sinner” brought an alabaster jar full of perfume and stood behind Jesus at his feet, crying and wetting his feet with her tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair and poured the perfume over them. When Simon saw this, he surmised, “If this man were really a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him; he would be aware of what kind of disgusting, sinful life she leads.”

Jesus, seeing that look in Simon’s eyes, spoke up and said, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Yes, teacher,” Simon answered, “tell me.”

“There were two men who owed money to a money lender,” Jesus began. “One owed him five hundred silver coins, and the

other man fifty. Neither of them could pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Which one do you suppose will love him more for this gracious deed?"

"I suppose," replied Simon grudgingly, "that it would be the one who was forgiven more."

"That is correct," said Jesus. Then he turned toward the woman as he continued to address Simon: "Do you see this woman? I came into your house, and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed my feet with her hair. You did not welcome me with a kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You provided no olive oil for my head, but she has covered my feet with perfume. I tell you, then, the great love she has shown me demonstrates that her many sins have been forgiven. But whoever has been forgiven for just a little, shows only a little love" (Luke 7:36-47).

It was the custom at that time, you see, that a Jewish host always placed his hands on a guest's shoulders and gave him the kiss of peace. And because of the dusty roads and the wearing of sandals, fresh water was always poured over a guest's feet. And a touch of perfumed oil was placed on the guest's head to show him he was welcome. *None* of these obligatory courtesies were performed by Simon, but they were given generously and with great love by the woman whom Jesus had forgiven.

Do not miss the main point here: This woman is not forgiven because she has shown such love; she loves Jesus because she has been forgiven!

At Simon's table, Jesus warns that those who *reluctantly* show love toward Jesus have experienced little forgiveness. And beyond that, he teaches that salvation is by faith in God's great love. Acts of love are not done to *earn salvation*; they are expressions of gratitude for grace and salvation already received.

IV. At the Table of Levi

One day Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting in his office. Jesus said to him, "Yo! Follow me." Okay, so he probably didn't say "Yo," but he would have if he'd been in Philly.... Levi,

whom we better know as Matthew, got up, left everything, and followed Jesus. Later Levi had a big feast in his house for the Lord. Among the guests were a large number of his cohorts – other despised tax collectors and common people. Seeing this crowd, some Pharisees and teachers of the Law needled Jesus' disciples about it:

“Why does he eat with tax collectors and other riff-raff?” they asked. Jesus himself took the liberty of answering them: “People who are well don't need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call people who are already respectable to repent, but outcasts” (Luke 5:27-31).

On yet another occasion, Jesus was eating at the house of still another Pharisee and told this parable:

“There was once a man who was giving a great banquet to which he invited many people. When it was time for the feast, he sent his servant to inform his guests, and to say, ‘Come now! Everything is ready!’ But they all began, one after another, to make excuses.

The first one told a servant, ‘Oh, gee...I'm sorry, but I've just bought a new field and I have to go inspect it; please accept my apologies.’

Another one said, ‘Oh, no, man...I recently purchased five pair of oxen, and I'm just now on my way over to try them out. Please offer my apologies.’

Yet another would-be guest explained, ‘Hey...buddy...I just got *married*, you know? And that seems like a pretty good excuse to me!’

The servant went back and told all of this to the master, who was furious with all the excuses and said to his servant, ‘Well, then go out to the streets and the alleyways of the village, and bring back the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

Soon the servant returned and advised: ‘Your order has been carried out, Sir, but there is still room for more guests.’

‘Then go back out, this time to the country roads and lanes, and tell *them* to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, none of those people who were first invited will taste a morsel of my dinner!’” (Luke 14:16-24).

In both of *these* table stories, respectability and faith in Christ are equated, a notion that Jesus strikes down as self-delusional. At these tables, Jesus shows us that no one is ever excluded except by their own choice. By the same token, no one's reluctance, or prejudice, or excuses, or stubbornness is about to put a damper on *God's* celebration!

V. At the Table of Passover

On that Thursday evening of Holy Week that we are remembering tonight, Jesus invited his disciples to share the Passover meal with him. They had scarcely begun to eat when an argument broke out around the table – “the Lord's Table” – as to which of them was the *greatest* disciple; that is, which one was Jesus' “main man.” Jesus, interrupting, said to them, “Here's the thing, guys: The kings of the pagans have *power* over their people. But forget about that. That's not the way it's going to be with you. Rather, the greatest one among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must be like the servant.”

Having said that, Jesus undressed himself down to his skivvies, poured some water into a washbasin, and began to wash his disciples' feet (Luke 22:24-26 and John 13:5).

Imagine that! Jesus' closest friends – the very ones to whom we now refer as “saints” – arguing about which one of them was the greatest at the last meal they would ever have with their Lord! Are we really so different from them, though? How many times do we compare ourselves with each other regarding who does more for the Lord (or the church)? And aren't we sometimes just a little too righteous about our church attendance compared to those who only come on Christmas and Easter?

When Jesus' began to wash the disciples' feet after their silly little show of comparisons, how embarrassed and ashamed they must have been. There *he* was, on his hands and knees in front of *them*. O Lord, at your Communion table, we, too, know such shame. O Lord, at your Communion table, show us how to be your faithful servants!

Later that evening, while they were dining, Jesus observed, "I tell you, one of you will betray me."

This, of course, created another commotion, as the disciples began to ask him defensively, one after another, "*Surely*, Lord, you *don't* mean *me*?!"

Jesus answered, "The one who dips his bread in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man will die as the scriptures say he will, but how terrible it will be for that man who will betray me...!"

Judas, who *would* betray him – and may have already done so – responded: "Surely, Teacher...you don't mean...*me*?"

And Jesus replied, "So you say" (Matthew 26:20-25).

Around these various tables we sit with Jesus as he sizes us up, evaluates our character, exposes our guilt, forgives us, and then invites us to continue dining with him. *His* table is now prepared for us. Jesus, our Host, awaits those who will come and partake. My sisters and brothers, let us join together in the banquet to which we have been invited.

- VI. The Sacrament of Holy Communion, signifying the last supper of our Lord before his betrayal, his abandonment by those closest to him, the extreme torture of his body, and his crucifixion as a common criminal between two thieves.

Each of us has prepared, in our own home, the elements to be used for this service of Communion. Be assured that the One who changed water into wine can change the *significance* of our crackers, our cookies, our Cheetos or Fritos, or whatever else we maybe using, into Holy Bread...the Body of Christ. And our juice, our water, our milk, our soda – whatever beverage we may have chosen for this sacrament, will be *transfigured* by the power of Christ into wine...his blood shed for us. With God, all things are possible for those who trust and believe in God's name.

We remember, then, that our Lord Jesus promised that those who hunger and thirst for what is right will be satisfied. Those who

come to him will never be hungry, and they who believe in him will never thirst.

Let us confess to the Lord not our extraordinary goodness, but our unworthiness, as we admit our sins:

God our Creator, we know that we are sinners and that we have done wrong. We are not worthy of being called your children, for we often get caught up in the wrong things – desires and activities that lead us away from you. We don't always love our neighbors, each other, or you as we should. Have mercy upon us, we pray, and forgive us; for our sake, and for the sake of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen!

The Lord Jesus, on that very night of his arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said: "This is my body, which is for you; do this, remembering me." Receive now the body of Christ that God has provided you for this banquet.

(Partake of your "bread.")

In the same way, Jesus took the cup after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this, remembering me." Receive now the blood of Christ that God has provided you for this banquet.

(Partake of your "wine.")

Let us pray:

We thank you, dear God, for this holy meal shared in the Spirit of Christ Jesus, your Son, who renews of strength, our faith, and our confidence in you, offering also to us life eternal. We praise you for giving all the good gifts that we receive in this life, and we pledge ourselves to serve you, even as you serve us through Christ our Lord. Amen.

We have *found* the Table of the Lord this night. It is within our own homes as we offer his hospitality and grace to others, and it is within our hearts as we share his good news, each in our own way as God leads us. Let us be reminded this night that

while we are separated by distance, we are still socially and spiritually united, bound together by this sacrament and the joy of knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

So may our hearts be filled with peace, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and may our peace spill over into the lives of others. Amen and amen. God be with you.