

The Table of Grace

sermon digest

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John 17:11b, 17-21

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We are on familiar ground here. Last year we began a ministry to people in our community that we called “The Table of Grace.” On the third Thursday of every month at 5:30 PM, Grace Covenant Church prepares a meal for anyone for any reason who will share our food. Our original intention was to feed the hungry in the name of Christ, but we have found that some come for the company as much as for the food. The table has long been a symbol of *koinonia*—the word of early Christians for Communion, fellowship, community. The dinner table is the gathering place for families.

Many of us hold warm memories of family mealtime and table conversations with parents and siblings. There we are physically positioned to face one another. The necessity of food becomes less important than the meaning of a shared meal and shared lives. Except perhaps for a prayer of blessing, most family meals lack ritual and formality. “Pass the bread” is hardly a liturgical formula. We tend to be more interested in practical concerns than religious symbols; but when nostalgia kicks in and we remember our times together around the table, the family mealtime comes to occupy a place in our lives as the center of our love for one another. Food takes on new meaning as a medicine of mercy, a means of compassion, and a bond of commitment. Indeed, the meal nourishes the soul as well as the body.

Given the importance of the family table, especially special occasion meals like Thanksgiving and Christmas with extended family, we can resonate with the event described in the Gospels and by Paul in 1 Corinthians where Christ gathered his disciples at the table. Passover was a formal occasion to remember the history that had formed the People of God—the Exodus of Jews from Egypt. Passover was a solemn time of remembering the days of slavery as well as a joyful celebration, offering thanksgiving to the God of redemption for leading the Hebrew family to a land of promise. The theme is freedom.

Depending on which Gospel you read, it may have been a Jewish Seder with a special rite for the unleavened bread and each cup of wine. But this Passover took on new meaning for the Christian family. This particular Thursday night was the night of Jesus’ arrest, the eve of his crucifixion. The bread is blessed, broken, and shared with a word that gives bread new meaning (1 Cor. 11:24-25): “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Then Jesus poured the wine: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

The Gospel John does not repeat the liturgy, but the writer does note the Passover occasion and the gathering of the disciples at the table. Only John tells the story of washing the disciples’ feet. Jesus gets up from the table, takes a towel and a basin of water and bathes the feet of his disciples, an act of humility and love. Only John moves the conversation to the centrality of love in the community of Christ, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Typical of the Fourth Gospel, the Table conversation flows into a message, the longest statement of Jesus found in any of the Gospels, the “farewell discourse.” The final word to disciples easily flows from speaking to disciples to speaking to God in behalf of disciples. In his priestly prayer, Jesus twice petitions the Father, “that they may be one.”

Note the background here. Peter has protested the washing of feet then bragged that he would never forsake Jesus. Judas has left the group to betray Jesus. Luke records an after dinner debate among the disciples about who among them will be the greatest in the Kingdom. In many ways, the dissonance here is typical of families. We may remember the ideal, loving gathering of our family around the table; but with a little effort we probably can also recall occasional conflicts, tears, and tensions. The community of Christ, the church, was anything but perfect either then or now. I suspect that John chose the message about Jesus’ prayer for one community for good reason. Like family, the church was already breaking up into warring parties like Paul described in Corinth. That is probably why Paul described the work of Christ as reconciliation. Christ came to reconcile the world to himself to lead the community of faith to become ambassadors of reconciliation.

Christians are marked by our divisions. We Christians have a problem that began at the dawn of

the Christian age. Writing about the early Christianity, developing at the time of the Fourth Gospel, Bart Ehrman speaks of "*Lost Christianities*," religions identified with Christ that did not make it. Ehrman viewed a religion of plural forms; from the beginning, Christianity was not one religion but many. The divisions loom in the background of Jesus' prayer.

The Christian share of the population has been about one-third for more than a century. According to the Pew Research Center, Christians comprise about 32% of the world population, 2.18 billion people in 2010. But the number of Christian denominations groups has grown from about 1,600 in 1900 to estimates up to 43,000 in 2012. True, these groups are not all hostile toward one another; but the diversity of Christian churches, denominations, and beliefs today is sufficient to challenge any claim to an exclusive claim of one Christianity. We are not one as the Son and the Father are one. The prayer of Jesus has not been fulfilled.

After visiting the U.S. in 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an essay on American Christianity. He lamented, "it has been granted to the Americans less than any other nation on earth to realize the visible unity of the church of God." Bonhoeffer correctly identified the fingerprint of the American religious culture. As an outsider, he saw what we tend to take for granted. This is a place where religion flourishes, but where churches tend to grow by division, and the problem of division seems to be directly related to a culture of religious liberty. If the German pastor-theologian were around today, he would probably see not only a multitude of Christian denominations, but a wide variety of non-Christian religions.

The Christian ecumenical movement (the move toward Christian unity) was born at the turn of the last century out of the confusion detected by missionaries presenting conflicting theologies and religious practices to non-Christians in global missions. While all Christian churches claimed to be followers of Christ, their liturgies and beliefs represented such divergent liturgies and beliefs as to imply distinctly different religions. Christian missionaries pressed their churches for a unified Christian witness to the world. The result was the World Council of Churches and the U.S. National Council of Churches, structures to provide for dialogue and healing of denominational conflict. The ecumenical movement perceived the sin of disunity as the crucial weakness of Christianity and worked to build cooperation and community between denominations where structural unity could not be established. The International Council of Community Churches of which we are a part was one example of the ecumenical age.

We are gathered in Grace. As much as I respect ecumenical institutions, I don't think that institutional unity was the primary concern of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. Pope Francis has brought a refreshing spirit to the whole Christian movement that causes hope for the world. He seems to be reaching beyond the demand for obedience to authority and institutional uniformity that has always represented the papacy.

The prayer of Jesus in John flows right out of the gathering of disciples around the Table of Grace. The new commandment to "love one another" and the priestly prayer of Jesus for his disciples are in the context of a problem. The disciples would be better described as a *bunch* than a *family*. Maybe they are family—in the worse sense of the word—expressed in petty jealousy and sibling rivalry. Each disciple seems to have more interest in his own position in the pecking order than in service to the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not hesitate to hold up a mirror revealing serious character flaws. The disciples are responsible for what they think and how they behave toward one another. Ultimately, the Son turns to the Father in prayer for needed communion. Unity will not be based on the authority of one over the others. This is a community of faith and love which come by the grace of God. The oneness must be modeled after the community of Father and Son.

Putting all Christians in the same denominational uniform does not create the community of Christ. Jesus prayed for the spiritual unity of the disciples—not that they all would look alike, wear the same clothes, and use the same words to express their faith. Too much of our search for Christian unity has focused on the structures of the church rather than on the transcendent power of the Spirit of God. Jesus prayed for the love of God to be evident in the lives of his friends.

Several years ago Millard Fuller was leading a dignitary tour of a Habitat for Humanity home site. He identified the house that the Carters had helped to build, and stopped to talk with a child who sat

on the porch. "Who lives here?" Fuller asked. "I do," the boy replied. "Do you know who built this house?" Fuller asked, expecting a child's awareness of a president who builds houses. Without hesitating, the child replied, "Jesus." Maybe the kid was right. I suspect that President Jimmy would agree. Before the Carters picked up a hammer, Jesus was behind the building of the house. If the house of God is going to come together in the unity of faith and harmony of action, the drive behind the move has to come from a higher source than the disciples.

Hey, do you know who built this house? The Psalmist (117) got it right: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." The community of Christ is founded on the Grace of God, where his people have learned to love one another as he has loved us. Come to the Table of Grace.