

The Welcome Table

Rev. Edward C. Horne

United Methodist Church of Westport and Weston

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Radical Hospitality 2: To All at the Table

Acts 2:42-47
Matthew 20:20-28

Last night, while you watching the playoffs or partying with friends or doing whatever you do on a Saturday night, Christians in Australia and Korea left their homes for places of worship to see their pastors take bread in their hands and declare, "This is my body." Later, while you were sleeping, followers of Christ in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem and in churches and basilicas throughout Europe gathered around the Table of the Lord to hear the words, "This is my blood." And today, in small country chapels and city cathedrals across this continent, stretching out finally through the islands of the Pacific, later tonight, the words will be uttered, "Shed for you."

"The body...the blood...shed for you." These are words that never lose their power. Words spoken to every believer in every age and every place. Simple words that call us from our differences into a unity of faith and purpose. Words that welcome us all to the table of grace.

What better way to gather people together than at a table? It cuts across all cultures and traditions. What is one of the first things a couple does when they start dating? They go out to dinner---or, if they're in college, maybe it's to breakfast or for pizza. And how does a lot of business get done? Deals are frequently sealed over a meal. One of the functions of a wedding reception, with all its food and drink, is to draw two families together. We could all think of hundreds of other such meaningful meal-time moments.

There is something fundamentally human about eating together. Consider the word "companionship." It is formed from two Latin roots: *cum*, meaning "together," and *panis*, meaning "bread." For human beings, companionship means, "breathing together."

No one understood the power of common meals better than Jesus. The gospels are full of stories of him eating and drinking with people—from the privileged and powerful to sinners and rejects. The early Christians continued the tradition, as we see in the reading of Acts 2, gathering together on a regular basis to share meals and fellowship. Whenever they ate and drank together, they did it in memory of the last meal he shared with them. And in some special, mystical way, they were brought into a deeper companionship with one another through him.

On this World Communion Sunday, as perhaps two billion of us 21st-Century followers

partake of this meal, we do it in remembrance of him. And whether some of our worldwide family think of the bread and juice becoming the literal body and blood of Christ or others understand it more to be a memorial meal, he is with us in the same mystical way, binding us into one.

True, when you look at his church today there does not appear to be much unity...at least in any way that looks like uniformity. We are so blessedly and maddeningly different. But that's not all bad---varying worship styles and theological understandings are a reflection of the fact that human beings are from the get-go blessedly and markedly different.

Yet for this one moment at least, denominations and political affiliations don't matter. We are no longer divided by age, sex, race, social status, or sexual orientation. Around the table, longstanding arguments may be forgotten and grievances forgiven, for we are all the guests of Jesus at his Supper. Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, divided by decades of hatred, will both be at the Lord's Table today. Liberals and conservatives, who so often cannot agree on biblical interpretation or doctrine, eat the same meal.

One of the most powerful portrayals of Christ's inclusive table for me comes in the movie, *Places in the Heart*. You may remember it from back in the 1980's, starring Sally Field and Danny Glover. The story is set in small-town Texas in the mid-1930's, when racial segregation still ruled, and depicts the struggle of a young widow to provide for her family after her husband is killed. With the helpful ingenuity of a black man who comes to work for her and figures out a way to grow cotton on her small, dusty farm, they do make it through—over the objections and hostility of some local Klansmen.

In the closing scene of the movie, the townspeople are all gathered at the local Baptist church. When it comes time for communion, they receive communion as they sit in their pews, in what I call the "picnic" style of sharing the elements. The trays of bread and juice are passed down the rows, among people who don't necessarily get along. But there they are together, sharing Christ's meal.

Then something surprising happens. Receiving the tray is a black youth who was murdered by local white thugs. He then passes the tray to one of the men who killed him. And that man passes the broken body of Christ to the one who killed the sheriff, who passes it to the sheriff himself. Everybody is there, the living and the dead, the guilty and the innocent, together, redeemed, forgiven.

It's an image of heaven, the banquet table to which we are all invited by the innocent one who was slain for us---all of us who are guilty of words and actions that have caused hurt and harm to others. All of us who, though we may not have committed murder, still have committed wrongs and turned from God so much that, if they were

held against us, would never allow us to sit at the table. But there we will be, redeemed, forgiven, together with all those whom Jesus welcomes and loves despite what they may have done, or not done.

That is why, whenever we share in the Supper of the Lord, we are doing something radical. We are participating in the New Creation in Jesus Christ. Yes, this world is still torn apart by racial, social, economic, and political divisions. Yes, sometimes you still may not like your neighbor very much, particularly that neighbor with the barking dog.

But this time of Holy Communion is a glimpse of the glory that is to come, a preview of the day when there will be no more pain, no more suffering, no more division, no more death, and all tears will be wiped away.

Companions in Christ, I invite you to take the bread and cup this morning with thanksgiving. Be grateful that Jesus has invited you to receive his feast. Welcome as your brothers and sisters not only the people in this congregation but believers everywhere on this planet. We are part of a fellowship without frontiers.

And because you have shared bread and experienced community, resolve to be about sharing bread with others. Near the end of the Roman Catholic mass, there are these words: "We have heard God's word and eaten the Body of Christ. Now it is time for us to leave, to do good works, to praise and bless the Lord in our daily lives."

The New Creation is coming. But the Kingdom of God is here, whenever we share bread and shelter, hospitality and hope with others. Whenever we open our hearts and our hands to those in need and invite them to the Welcome Table of Love.

The meal is ready. The table is set. Anybody hungry?