



LEARNING TO EAT AT THE LORD'S TABLE

Exodus 16:14-21; Mark 14:22-25

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You can tell a great deal about a person by the way he or she eats a meal. If a person gulps his or her food down in a rush without really tasting it, this indicates something about his or her attitude toward the food. Some people never eat a meal without watching television or reading a newspaper, book or a magazine. They almost ignore their food. Other people seem to delight in each bite. They savor their food and notice its color and texture. Eating is a pleasure for them, and it is a pleasure to prepare meals for these persons.

Our mood can also affect how we eat. If we are angry, depressed, grieving, or lonely, it affects our appetite negatively. If we are happy, joyous, laughing and full of pleasure, our bodies are affected in a different way. When our life is pleasant and the company is good, a meal tastes better. Our moods affect our digestive system. Studies have indicated that our attitude at the time we eat a meal really does influence our physical well-being.

Our Attitude at the Lord's Table

If it is important how we eat physical food, think how significant our attitude is when we come to the Lord's Table. The way we approach his Table reveals something about our religious development. We often approach the Lord's Table in haste, without any thought or preparation. We sometimes remain detached during the service and often simply go through the motions of the service. It has become routine for us, without much meaning. And then, we wonder why we get so little from the observance.

In Milan, Italy, there is a house where a group of priests lived years ago. On the wall of what was once a dining room is a painting by Leonardo deVinci, who was one of the most famous artists of all times. When you examine the painting on the wall, you can see a place in the lower middle section where someone cut a doorway. Why? Because the priests were unaware of the significance of Leonardo deVinci's painting, and thought that it was much more important to be able to go directly into the kitchen from the dining room than to preserve this painting.

Many of us come to this Table oblivious to the presence of the One with whom

we are coming to commune. We are simply not aware of the sacredness of this occasion, and so we sit through it and miss the beauty, mystery, and wonder of the event. This morning I would like for us to think about ways of approaching the Lord's Table that may enable us to commune more effectively.

Christ Is the Host of This Table

The first reminder that I would offer you today is this: Remember that Jesus Christ himself is the host of this Table. The Lord's Table is not your table, nor my table. It is not this church's table. It is the Lord's Table. Jesus Christ is the host. He is the one who took bread and broke it. He is the one who took the cup and shared it with his disciples. It was he who blessed the bread and the cup. It is he who is host here at this table today. Jesus Christ is not simply *on* the table. He is *at* the table. He is *presence*, and he is *present* with us. Today we celebrate the One who is host because he was victor over sin and death. We come to this table at his invitation. He extends his hands to all Christians, all sinners who will trust him, to come and commune with him at His Table. "Come unto me all ye who are weak and are heavy laden." "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Remember Jesus Christ is the host at this Table.

We Come to Receive

Secondly, remember that we come to this table to receive. It was Jesus himself who took bread and broke it and said that it represented his body. He took the cup and declared that it represented his blood. We are receivers—receivers of what he has given for us. As we come to this table, we acknowledge that we are sinners saved by grace. We are recipients of God's love, grace, and forgiveness. "For by grace are you saved through Faith"—not by anything you do. Grace is God's gift. We receive it. "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his only begotten son." Grace is not something we earn but something we receive. We come to his table this day to be receivers—to receive his love, forgiveness, and redemption.

"This is my body," Jesus said. In Aramaic there is no verb for "is." Literally it reads, "This-body." "This-body" is not concerned with past or present but with identification. The bread and cup are representatives of Jesus' sacrifice. It is almost humorous how some theologians have wrestled for ages over the verb "is" and its meaning in this particular phrase. Jesus probably never even used it. He was declaring that he is present with us as we receive him.

"This (*is*) my body for you," Jesus said. "For you, Peter. For you, James and Andrew. For all you twelve who are gathered here. It is for you that I lay down my life." But it is also for you and for me. Martin Luther said that authentic religion is always best expressed in personal pronouns. God didn't love us abstractly. In Jesus

Christ we have seen God's love for us, and each of us is able to receive it now.

The Old Testament lesson today focuses on the manna which was given to the children of Israel in the wilderness. They were told that they could not hoard it. They had to gather it fresh each day. What a powerful lesson for all about our relationship to God. Many persons live with the naive notion that they can drop-in on God anytime they want to. They think they can "feed" on God and then "store" up that experience without seeking a fresh experience. They worship God occasionally and then wonder why their life goes stale and flat. They do not understand why their religion seems worthless and doesn't sustain them during difficult times. Our experience with God must always be fresh. We have to come again and again to his table to be fed. We come again and again to worship, to confess our sins, renew our spirit and go forth to serve. Having received his forgiveness, love, and grace, his presence is made real in our lives, and then we can live more effectively for him.

We Gather to Express Thanksgiving

Thirdly, we gather at this table to express thanksgiving. Jesus took the bread and the cup. He took; he broke; he blessed; he gave; he said; and he blessed. He blessed and so must we. We bless God this day for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. We gather at this table as a sign of our thanksgiving to God who cared enough for each of us that his son laid down his life that we might have life. One of the biblical words for the Lord's Supper is Eucharist. Eucharist means thanksgiving. We come to this table in thanksgiving for what God has done for us. As we take this bread and cup, it is a sign of our gratitude to God for what God has done for us through his love.

The New Covenant

But we also come to this table as a sign of covenant. Jesus said that this cup is the New Covenant. That night in the Upper Room was the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant. The word "covenant" appears in the Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation. It is found 286 times in the Old Testament alone. God made a covenant with Abraham, Moses at Mt. Sinai, and with other prophets. God established a covenant relationship with his people. But Israel broke the covenant again and again. They assumed that they had a special handle on God.

Jeremiah prophesied that the day would come when the covenant which had been written in stone would be written on the human heart. In that Upper Room where Jesus took bread and broke it and took a cup and shared it, that was the beginning of the New Covenant. At that moment the covenant was written on the human heart as a new community emerged. You and I are a part of that covenant

community when we commit our lives to Christ and pledge our loyalty to him. As the New Community, we covenant with one another to bear each other's burdens, and support each other in times of need. We draw strength from each other and the Lord of the New Covenant. Each time we eat at the Lord's Table is a sign of the covenant. It is a sign of our covenant with Christ and his covenant with us, and our covenant with one another as his people. So, let us come to his table this morning and pause to reflect on how we eat this meal.

Several years ago, Andrew Wolfe, visited West Berlin. One night, as he was walking from his hotel, he passed a bombed-out cathedral. Nothing but the shell of the cathedral was left. As he approached the cathedral, he noticed a statue standing in front of the church. He could see that the figure was chipped and battered in many places, and one hand was missing. On drawing closer to the figure, he realized that it was a statue of Christ. The statue stood with his hands outstretched. At first, he thought this was a sacrilege and wondered why they didn't replace it with a new statue. But as he got closer to the statue, the eyes of the Christ figure seemed to telegraph a message. "It was for this, exactly this that I had to come; to bear in my own body the signs of a broken world, and a broken humanity." At that moment the words of Jesus at the institution of the Lord's Supper came to him: "This is my body which is broken for you." The words took on new meaning for him. "Before they had been simply words out of a ritual, but there in the bombed-out shell of a church in a city divided by hostility, I understood their real meaning. A broken body for a broken world; that's what they mean."¹

A minister friend of mine Don Harbuck, who died too young, penned the following lines in 1970:

THE TABLE

TWO WORLDS—

ONE TO BELIEVE IN

ONE TO LIVE IN

AND BETWEEN

NO BRIDGE BUT A DREAM

ROOT OUT OF DRY GROUND

HEAT-CHOKED AT MIDDAY

IMPATIENT, PARCHED

IN THE LONG AFTERNOON JUST BEGUN.

MEMORY-HAUNTED

BY BREAD AND WINE AROUND THE TABLE OF TOGETHERNESS

WHERE PRESENCE IS REAL

BODY AND BLOOD AND WORD
FELT AND TOUCHED AND TASTED.

YET ALWAYS
AT THE END

A PARTING INTO NIGHT
WITH FRAIL SOULS
CLUTCHING CRUST AND CUP
IN FINGERS OF HOPE.

STUMBLERS IN THE DARK
SPOILED BY LIGHT
CONDEMNED TO SEARCH

ENDLESSLY
FOR LOVE'S TABLE
WHERE BELIEF AND LIFE

EMBRACE.

Christ was broken for the brokenness of humanity that we might be drawn back to God. We come to this table today aware that we are all, in so many ways, broken persons—sinners all—but through his broken body we find wholeness and redemption. Let us come to his table with faith and expectation. ■

1 Andrew R. Wolfe, "Broken Bread for a Broken World," Pulpit Digest (September-October, 1984), 3-4.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O loving God, we gather this day to worship You. Our presence here in this place affirms our dependence upon You. Our journey through life is often difficult and hard unless we are fed by Your spirit, so we come to Your Table to experience the power of Your Presence pulsating through our veins. As we drink this cup, may we feel the strength of Your grace sustaining us so that we will thirst no more. As we eat this bread, may we be fed by the Bread of Heaven. Nourish us until our will, desire, hope, and dreams become Your will and goals as we eat at Your Table. We offer You our mind, heart, soul and strength. O Bread of Life, feed us until we are fully nourished to live for You.

We bring before You our burdens, sorrows, illnesses, hurts, needs, and pains and pray for the assurance of Your abiding presence. Thank you, Lord, that nothing separates us from Your love. In times of difficulty this knowledge comforts us. We come to Your Table with our joys and happiness to express our thanksgiving for the wonder of living. O Bread of Heaven, we come to Your Table that we may hunger and thirst no more. Feed us with Your abundant grace. Through Christ, whose death revealed Your sacrificial love to us. Amen.