



A MEAL THAT LASTS THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

John 6:30-40, 48-51

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We are all familiar with the expression, in fact sometime or another we may have said it ourselves, but it is true of children and especially of teenagers. They finish a meal and declare, “I am still hungry!” We all understand that sometimes we do not seem to get enough to eat. We eat a meal, and it is not long before we are hungry again. We all normally eat several meals a day. We long for some food that lasts.

If you recall the story in the Gospel of John, Jesus had just performed a miracle in which he had fed five thousand men, women, and children. The people were deeply impressed by someone who could feed them. So the Scribes and the Pharisees came to him and said, “You have done this wonderful thing. Let us see if you can do something more spectacular. If so, we will know that you really are from God. Prove to us that you are God’s chosen one.” In the light of this story, think with me about communion around several themes.

Show Us You Are from God

The first lesson we note in our text is the demand that Jesus prove God’s existence in his life. That is what the Scribes and Pharisees were asking Jesus. “Prove to us that you are from God.” We have seen that kind of question was raised in many places in the gospels. Thomas, for example, was the one who said, “Lord, show us the Father and we will believe.” Jesus said, “Thomas, have I been with you so long, and yet you have not seen the Father?” Jesus was saying, “I give evidence of the realness of the Father through my teachings and ministry.”

In one of our children’s Sunday School classes several years ago, some of the boys and girls were asking their Sunday School teacher a similar question, “How can we know that God is real?” That is the same old issue, “Prove to us that there is a God.” Prove God!

What Sign Would You Accept?

What sign would it take to convince you that God is real? Look around you

at this fantastic, unbelievable universe! That is a pretty good sign of God. Did the universe just happen? There are some who say that it just happened. To me it takes far more faith to believe that the world just happened by chance, than to say there was a source called God behind it as Creator. What sign would you accept? Would you accept the sign of a hand, suddenly appearing and writing across the sky saying, "I am alive, I am real. Signed, God"? Would that convince you that there is a God? Or, would you think that some preachers have cooked up a scheme to convince you? We search for signs.

Jesus as the Central Sign

Jesus said to the Scribes and Pharisees, "You want me to produce bread like Moses produced in the wilderness? Hey, you are wrong. Moses did not give you bread. That bread came from God." Bread was only symbolic of the power of God. This whole universe, and you and I, are symbols, or signs, of the reality of the presence of God. Jesus was saying to them, "I am *the* central sign of the "realness" of God. When you see me, you know the realness of God. I am the one who makes God real." We can point to Jesus and his life, death teachings and resurrection to affirm that God is real.

A Bountiful Meal

As we gather at this table, remember also that the Lord's Supper is a plentiful meal. Plentiful! We know all about meals that are bountiful, don't we? I remember when I was pastor of my student church in northern Virginia. I was one of those starving college students then. You know that it seemed like people were right when they said, "Bill seems to have hollow legs. He could never be filled up." I remember how wonderful it was to go to my church, and then have an invitation to eat at one of the homes in that farming country. When I sat down at their table we would usually have several meats, all kinds of fresh or canned or frozen vegetables from their own gardens and several kinds of deserts to finish the meal. I could never seem to get enough to eat until then. I was always full after those Sunday dinners!

On the third Sunday in August and even to this day, my church, Good Hope Baptist, had and still have their annual homecoming. The tables were stretched out across the lawn with food piled high from all of those families. If you could not get plenty to eat that Sunday, you never could. We all know what it is like at Christmas and Thanksgiving to eat bountiful meals. We eat far more than we can begin to hold. Often our family, after eating a big Christmastime dinner, find ourselves lying around like the Culhaines family in the old TV show. We are so full, we cannot move. We have eaten too much. We understand what it is to eat plenty.

Jesus Is the Bread that Nourishes Us

Yet, some say, “How can this meal at the Lord’s Table be plentiful? How can this tiny piece of bread and this cup be a plentiful meal?” The bountifulness that the Lord’s Supper offers is not a physical replenishment. The Lord’s Supper is plentiful, because it reminds us that the presence of Christ as the “Bread of Life” sustains us. The bread and cup remind us that we receive the presence of Christ at the Table in a unique way. The bread and cup remind us of the living, risen Christ who is always with us and that we are “fed” by his spiritual presence. He is “Bread” not in a way to satisfy our physical hunger, but he gratifies a deeper, spiritual hunger. The elements at the table remind us that we are nourished by Christ and sustained by the One who is the Lord of life. He is one who revealed to us the sacrificial and unconditional love of God through his life, teachings, miracles, death and resurrection. He has shown us the depth of true living and the meaning of life. He declares, “I am the bread of life and when you eat this bread you will not be hungry or thirsty again.”

The Lord’s Table Is Open to All

Remember as we gather at the Lord’s Table, there is always room for others. There is always room for another chair to be pulled up. The Table of the Lord is never too full that another person cannot come and eat at the Lord’s Table. That is one of the great universal messages in the Gospel – whosoever will— may come and can be saved by God’s grace and be fed at his Table.

A pastor in Maine tells about a YMCA basketball league that was active in his community. The YMCA had a policy that every player on the team had to get a chance to play sometime during the season. The coaches could not just let the players sit on the bench. It was the last game of the season. The team that was in first place was playing the team that was in last place. The teams reached the last four minutes of the game and the coaches started substituting players.

The coach of the losing team sent a boy into the game. It did not take long to realize that this boy was not only slow physically, but was a little slow mentally. The players would be going down the court one way, and he would be going the other way. Then they would go the opposite way and he would go the other way. It was obvious after a few times up and down the court that this boy was not completely like the other boys.

Finally, as this lad got in tune with his team and was coming down the court the same way they were. His team had the ball. By accident, one of his players threw him the ball. The whole gym hushed. The officials froze. Everybody stopped and looked at the little lad. The boy stood there with the ball in his hands a moment, turned the ball in his hands a couple of times, took two or three steps without dribbling, and then, shot. The opposing team that had kept their opponents to no more than thirty points in a game did not even raise their hands. They just stood

there motionless. The ball hit the backboard and bounced off. A player caught it and threw it to the same boy again.

The boy looked at the ball, took two or three steps without dribbling, and then shot again. The ball hit the rim and went in! A roar went up. The place went wild with yelling. There wasn't a dry eye in the gym. The referees blew their whistles and the coaches substituted again. The boy went back to his bench elated.

The game continued to the end. But that day on a basketball court, a barrier had been broken. The players showed acceptance of someone who was different. They paused, and even broke the rules, so that he might be a part of their group. He went back to his bench, a lad who had probably been the butt of many jokes and the victim of a lot teasing and harassment, feeling encouraged and accepted by his peers.

When we come to the Lord's Table, the good news is that there is a chair for everyone to come and eat of the plenty of God's redeeming grace. No one is excluded. God's loving, forgiving, accepting grace is extended to all who will come.

A Perpetual Presence

Then remember, we come to the Lord's Table aware that we are acknowledging food that is perpetual. The bread and cup are lasting in their affect. When we eat of this bread and drink of this cup, we are taking in spiritual nourishment. It is a kind of nourishment which is the very Lord's presence. Some people stumble over the words of Jesus, "You have to eat my flesh, and drink my blood," because they want to take these words literally. But they are metaphors, of course. We use metaphors all the time about drinking and eating. For example, we say: we are drinking in someone's actions or we are devouring a book or we are consuming a musical CD or tape or I cannot swallow some story or he has ingested his account or she gulped down her feelings or he is consumed by ambition... All of these are only figures of speech.

Open Ourselves to Christ's Presence

By this image, Jesus is telling us that we have to take his presence into ourselves. Accepting him is an individual act, as individual as eating. No one else can eat for you, so no one else can give you the presence of Christ. You have to open yourself and accept him. You can have a room filled with books, but if you do not take one off the shelf and read it, it is not part of you. You may have every CD imaginable, but if you never play one and listen to it, you cannot drink in that music. You may have a wonderful five course meal set before you, but if you do not eat it, it will not nourish you nor will you enjoy it.

So it is with the power of Christ. Christ nourishes you only as you allow him

to come into your life and give you his presence. When you do that, you are satisfied. You are satisfied by the power and presence of a Christ that is perpetual. Christ continues to be there, to sustain you in all of your life. Jesus is telling us that the bread he gives is eternal, because it comes with the love, grace, and power of God's presence in and with us. Jesus Christ is the one who is life -- life everlasting.

Some of you remember and likely witnessed, and others have read about or seen versions of the event, that in July of 1969, Apollo 11 took off for the moon. One of the persons who was a part of that flight was Buzz Aldrin. He was a devout Christian, a Presbyterian. He talked with his pastor about something he wanted to do on that mission and wondered if it would be acceptable. He wondered if it would be okay to take communion on the moon. The Presbyterian synod gave him permission.

At a certain point after they landed on the moon, the public heard these words as Buzz Aldrin radioed Houston, "This is Eagle. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of this past few hours and give thanks in his own individual way."

Just imagine, this rocket ship had just landed on the moon for the first time! Buzz said that during this time there was a radio blackout and only silence. During these moments, he took out the plastic package he had taken with him that contained the bread and wine. He said, "I poured the wine into the chalice that our church had given me. With the one-sixth gravity on the moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was an interesting thing that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food ever eaten there, were communion elements." Communion elements were the first fluid and the first food on the moon!

He continued, "As I partook of the elements I knew my church back home was having communion at the same time as I was. I sensed, especially strong, my unity with our church back home, and with the church everywhere." Then he read this passage of scripture that he had brought, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me." (John 15:5 TEV)¹.

Whether it is on the moon, whether it is here on earth, in Raleigh, some remote place across this earth, or even on some distant planet, we know that God is present. We can commune with God who is from everlasting to everlasting. What a marvelous sense of presence that is. God provides a meal that will last through God's divine presence. ■

¹ Buzz Aldrin, "Communion In Space," *The Guidepost Treasury of Hope* (New York: Guidepost Associates, Inc., 1976).

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we acknowledge that you are holy and we are ordinary. You are Spirit and we are mortal. You are eternal and we are transient. Yet You call us to worship You in this place and at this time. We ask You to accept our confession of our sins and grant us Your forgiveness. We gather at this sacred Table to worship You. We long to love You, understand Your way better and to know You. Hence, we gather before Your Table today.

We bring our sins, pain, burdens, doubts, fears, grief and brokenness to You. Heal us with Your love. Forgive us with Your grace. May the radiance of Your grace and love give us peace and joy.

We come to Your Table to commune with You. Speak to us through the Bread and Cup, the words and silence, the mystery and simplicity of this moment. May Your presence be real to us in this hour, O God. We come to Your Table to sense Your nearness and your abiding grace. Amen.