

Isaiah 50:4-9  
Mark 14:17-25

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Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
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World Communion Sunday  
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## THE LAST SUPPER

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." *Mark 14:22*

I don't know how many meals are recorded in the Bible, but it's a lot. From the first sly tasting of the forbidden fruit to the last invited banquet in the New Jerusalem, from Abraham's extravagant reception of three strangers to Jesus' feeding the multitude, from the first Passover to the Last Supper in the upper room—there are a lot of meals.

Meals, special meals, meals not wolfed down on the way to somewhere, but where friends and family nourish each other across a private space, these meals seem to touch something more than food, something sacred.

Our ancestors in the faith saw meals as a way of being with God, of entering into a fellowship that touches the ineffable. When sacrifices were made in the Old Testament period it was not accidental that the gifts offered to God were almost always edible things: grain, meat, bread, and wine, things that might please God's palate and thank God for sharing earth's table with us. At the last supper with his disciples, Jesus therefore, took bread and wine and said of these things that they represented himself. He said that whenever we eat together as the church we should remember him as the bread and the cup because in the profoundest way he is bread, he was the cup, as our call to worship says. He is the good seed that falls to the earth and dies, and in dying grows up a hundredfold with new life, life that is still ground out of the seed, mixed with that other most elemental, life giving thing—water, invigorated with a dramatic substance that made it grow dramatically (yeast, like the Spirit), purged in an oven, transformed, broken again, and shared. So, too, is the grape, grown to maturity, harvested, its life crushed out, its nature changed, and when it is partaken it quickens and invigorates. This was the nature of his life, he said, the nature of "God with us"—Immanuel. And we are to remember him by these things that are daily with us: this bread, this fruit of the vine.

So on this World Communion Sunday, from the dawn's first breaking over the International Date Line to the last sliver of darkness, in myriad congregations

throughout the world bread will be broken and the cup lifted in living remembrance of him.

Some meals have a way of leaving their imprint on the soul. This was such a meal, this last farewell in the upper room. But this was no ordinary farewell. Here was sunset on the disciples but with the pernicious swirling form of a tornado lurking on the horizon. For no less than seven times in this chapter the word "betray" is used, even in the midst of this most sacred meal. For one was close at hand who for private motives that we can only speculate upon would drive this sacred enterprise upon the rocks. But let's not single out Judas—who, before the dust had settled on Jesus' arrest, took his own life out of unbearable remorse. I just finished an intense study of Matthew's Gospel, and one fact made me catch my breath—all the disciples betrayed him. As do we. Still, Jesus chose to lift the moment to a higher plane, leaving his own transforming tokens of grace and acceptance upon the fellowship.

It was our tenth anniversary, back in 1983. Jane and I were in a fine restaurant high above Charlotte. It was early evening and the place was almost deserted except for one other family at a nearby table, a German family, a mother, father, and their son. We exchanged cordial pleasantries as we came in and sat down. They were already engaged in their meal and we went about ours.

But I was much distracted that night. My father was very ill at the time (he would die the next year), some thousands of miles away. He lay in a hospital bed, the final complications invading his body that were brought on by forty years of illness—a condition that we suspected began in a Stalag Luft 3, a prisoner of war camp, a *German* prisoner of war camp; an illness that had robbed me of some of the best years between a father and a son.

There was one time. It was on a sunny green plateau, a sort of park I think it was, on the high cliff above Ilfracombe in southern England, overlooking the English Channel. We were on vacation and I got to play soccer with my Dad and my brother, Geoff. Dad had the first of many operations perhaps a year before, still he and Geoff (my middle brother) played strikers and I played in goal. My Dad had been a goalie in his youth in school, and I wanted to show him what I could do. And the sun shone down on an English park that afternoon and created something sacred in that moment between father and son. But there weren't many others. He just wasn't up to it.

In the restaurant my mind began to play footloose with reality, contriving all sorts of sinister relationships. I glanced furtively, now and then, at this family nearby, listening to their guttural conversation, this German family. What did this man do during the war I wondered? He was perhaps in his early fifties by now. A member of the Hitler youth back then, perhaps? A young Nazi? What contribution might he or his family have had to my father's now wasted condition? He would

have been about the age of his flaxen haired son who sat at the table with him. I imagined the father in the son, and the son in the uniform of the Hitler youth.

I kept trying to chase the images from my mind, but the remembrance of my father's stolen decades of illness all through my childhood, my adolescence and adulthood seemed to cry out for some settlement, some amends. Then, quite without warning, their young son pushed back his chair, rose from his seat, and taking something from their table he brought it to our table and gave it to Jane. It was a single, red rose. And with great warmth and obvious sincerity he said, "My family and I wanted to wish you both a happy anniversary. Please," he said, "accept this small token with our very best wishes."

He could never have known what mixture of remorse and healing took hold of me in that moment.

Here is an anniversary table in our midst, richly spread. A table that invites us to put aside what needs to be cleansed between ourselves and others. A table that invites us to see things as Jesus saw them, clearly, justly; to think as he thought; to reconcile and heal; to nourish lives with the presence of God, that all may be one the whole world over.

Amen.