

Who Is at The Table?

Preacher: Rev. Reebee Girash

Date: September 8, 2019

1:10:30

Introduction:

There are two scripture readings this morning. The first is from Luke's account of the Last Supper, and the second describes the days between Jesus' post-Easter encounters with his followers, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Listen for God's word to us in Luke 22:

Luke 22:19-20

Then Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'

As the book of Acts begins, the eleven remaining disciples (Judas Iscariot is gone) and Jesus' other closest followers gather after Jesus' ascension to figure out what comes next. In the story of the early church, listen for God's word to us:

Acts 1:12-14

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Sermon

It's forty days after the Last Supper, 40 days after that sacred meal, forty days after Easter, and Jesus has ascended. His closest followers gather in an upper room, just a few minutes walk away from where they say goodbye to him again. It seems to be the same room where they shared that last supper with Jesus.

This is the quiet, in between moment, between Easter and Pentecost.
This is the moment when they can breathe deeply and reflect.

Luke-Acts tells us so much has happened: their teacher who taught them love and mercy and justice and hope, has died. And yet they experience his presence. Three days after all hope was lost, he breaks the bonds of death and then, he blesses them and teaches them again and he eats with them. They know the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread. For forty beautiful days he walks with them again. And then, he tells them to love and forgive and bless and heal and work in his name, he tells them to be his witnesses, and then, as if drawn up in to a cloud, he is gone.

So they gather in the upper room, for a quiet, in between moment.

Imagine those who are in the upper room -

The 11 who are left.

And certain women, and his brothers, and maybe a few more.

Imagine the tumult of emotion in those days,
Grief
and joy.
Expectation
and uncertainty.

Surely they are overwhelmed.

Imagine that someone is cooking. Perhaps it is Martha, baking the bread, preparing the meal .
This is what someone in every circle does, when things get complicated.

And they are sitting there, waiting for the this Spirit, and eating and talking and praying.
Perhaps it is Peter, already feeling a new mantle of leadership, who places his hand on their
shoulders and gathers them together.

And there is much to talk about.

They have a commission to continue Jesus's ministry, and they have no idea how to continue.

They ask one another, how do we follow his Way when he is not here? How do we love the way
he loved? How do we offer this Way to those who never met him? And how will we keep
going?

Maybe it is Philip who says, our teacher told us what to do. Do this, do what we are doing right
now, at this table, to remember him. We need to keep breaking bread together. He shared
meals with people; let's eat with people.

And maybe it is Levi, also called Matthew, the tax collector, who says: Yes, his table was open
to everyone, even me. Our table will be a welcome table.

John, perhaps, offers the thanksgiving. Even on the hardest night, Jesus gave thanks to God.
Long had he desired to share this meal with us, every meal he hosted was somehow joyful. Can
our meals be thankful and joyful?

Imagine the Samaritan woman offering to pour out glasses of living water.

And Peter, next to her, says: Forgiveness and grace have to be on the table next to the bread.
Jesus forgave me for denying him, shared the bread with me, even though. Anyone who comes
to our table, receives his grace.

And maybe it is Thomas who remembers Jesus' promise. Jesus' covenant freed us and
connected us with God's mercy and love. This is the place we act out his covenant, his
promise.

And perhaps Mary of Bethany, the mystic who sat at Jesus' feet, shares a vision. This is what
the reign of God looks like. I saw it when he fed five thousand and I saw it when he ate with
people no one else would and I saw it when he broke bread with us: Jesus' table where
everyone is welcome, the table where everyone is fed. Jesus' table is the heavenly banquet.

And Mary, his dear mother, she says, yes. This is the promise, these are the meals, these are
the people, this is our sustenance and strength, like grains gathered into one loaf, we will come
back again and again to Jesus' table.

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We don't know what happens in that upper room where they gather. These are just my imaginings. But we're told in Acts that between that final experience of Jesus, and the Pentecost moment, Jesus' closest followers have ten days together, time when they "agree they are in this for good and they are completely together in prayer" as the Message Bible puts it.

And so I imagine that in that room they have begun to make meaning, and begun to recover, and begun to understand, and begun to prepare to be the church, to lead the Way. They have started to see the sacred in the ordinary, the banquet in the humble meal. They have made room for their Host, and for everyone who is hungry.

"Because of the last supper, no meal among disciples is just a meal, because no loaf is just bread, no cup is just wine....those who share [this meal] are joined to one another." (Fred Craddock, Luke: Interpretation Series, Pages 255-256)

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Later in Acts, we hear what happens after the arrival of the Holy Spirit. These upper room folks and those they welcome to their table:

46 Day by day, as they spend much time together in the temple, they break bread from house to house and eat their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. (Acts 2:46, adapted)

They are setting the table, and feeding people, in spirit and body.

As one writer puts it, "In the early church, "hospitality remained a central practice...Christians regularly received others into their homes...Shared meals...became important locations for building unity and a new identity, for transcending social differences, and for making sure the local poor were fed." (Christine Pohl, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53383.pdf>)

To make it plain, I am suggesting that the church discovered in those earliest days a way to live out Jesus' great commission, by offering hospitality and inviting people to ordinary meals that became sacred.

So it has been for two thousand years, give or take a few arguments and schisms, that when Christians come to this table, we meet Jesus, and we share something profound. From the Welcome Table comes our vision of all being fed; from the banquet comes hospitality to the stranger, the poor, the traveler and the needy. From the table where everyone has enough we are bold to call for justice and equality.

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I hear this is true, here, at Pilgrim Church. Indeed, it's the very first thing I read about this congregation. In the search process, churches provide written introductions and this is how your search committee began: "We are a warm, friendly, and Open and Affirming church that aims to provide a spiritual home and a sense of community for all, no matter how well-lit their path of faith may be. We truly believe and live by the statement that all are welcome at our table." The very first commitment your search committee shared is the commitment to hospitality and inclusion, lived out at the Welcome Table. And this is what you tell visitors and newcomers, too:

"At Pilgrim Church, the sacrament of Communion is a symbol of Christ's radical welcome of all people." (<https://www.pilgrimcongregational.org/communion>) This is a church committed to welcome, and you live that out at the Communion table.

In this sanctuary, people prepare the meal with love, and come forward to share the bread and the cup with with glad and generous hearts.

It is your sacred practice to have youth and children bring forth the bread and the cup, because kids know how to walk in with joy, and because all God's children are welcomed and valued at this table.

You declare a bold and hopeful invitation to every one who is hungry for this meal.

With Christians everywhere, you seek forgiveness and receive mercy remembering that this is a table of grace and reconciliation. There are times when reconciliation is a challenge, and yet, when faithful folks come to this table, we're working toward forgiveness. Like Jesus' earliest, closest followers, we don't always do this perfectly. None of us love perfectly, we don't live perfectly either, but we keep coming to be fed and we keep making room at the table.

This feast nurtures our hope, strength and resilience. This meal strengthens community and knits us together again, even when it is hard to be in community. This bread and cup unite you with Christians in all times and places. And we glimpse, at this table, the heavenly banquet.

You come to this table with joy and go out into the world with joy, to live in the world according to this vision. This is the reign of God that you rehearse and practice and embody. Having been fed at this table you work to build a world where everyone is welcomed and valued and every beloved child of God is loved and fed.

One of the folks who told me about this congregation said you are bonded and connected, and that you have a greater impact on this town than your numbers would suggest, and another said, "they're everywhere" in town, doing good. That comes from the way you experience community here at the welcome table, which gives you something to share.

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You may have guessed that the experience of Communion, and all of the stories of Jesus sharing meals, are foundational to the way I understand church. The search committee asked me in the second interview to lead a devotional and it will not surprise you to know we reflected together on Communion. With that evening in my mind, I chose to share these reflections with you this morning because I've been praying about what an amazing honor it would be, to share meals with you, Pilgrim Church. What a privilege it would be to sit next to you in Pilgrim Hall at a potluck, to harvest zucchini with you at the interfaith garden, to hear your sacred stories over lunch, and most of all, to join you at Christ's own table.

My prayer for this congregation is that you continue to know the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread, and you continue to share the love you receive at this table. May it always be so. Amen.