

John 13:31-35  
May 2, 2010

South Plains

### The Making Of A Meal

I want to invite you to an experiment with our imagination. Imagine what the disciples of Jesus were thinking the first time they ate together consciously re-enacting the last supper they ate with Jesus. Try to put yourself in their shoes or sandals. They remembered that meal vividly because it was just before his crucifixion, his last supper with them. In the days after the resurrection, some of the disciples had seen the risen Lord with their own eyes. Others had eaten a meal with him. A story was circulating about two of them who met a stranger on the road to Damascus. They invited the stranger to eat with them. The punch line of that story never failed to raise the hair on their arms: "Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" as Jesus.

With stories like that one running through their minds, they wondered what in the world might happen now when they broke the bread and passed the cup. Jesus had died on the cross and had been buried by Joseph of Arimathea. That much was certain. A number of people had reported that Jesus arose on the first day of the week after his death. Enough of them had seen Jesus alive after the crucifixion to insure that the idea of his resurrection was not going to go away. And, it was spooky how his presence was experienced especially around a meal. Here they are at table.

Friendship around food had been important to Jesus. People whose piety was puffed up had accused him of eating with sinners, of being a glutton and a wine-bibber. It is true that he once created gallons and gallons of wine in order to keep a wedding party going. Good wine, it was, not the cheap stuff. When he taught in the countryside, he insisted that his hearers should be provided with food. He fed 5,000. Surprisingly, Jesus also accepted dinner invitations from Pharisees.

This was a little surprising only because Jesus was a good Jew who identified himself not with the Pharisees and scribes, but with the Jews we might call non-observant. For the most part, these people were anything but non-believers. They wanted to be spiritually and morally religious Jews, but they were not able to keep the rules of religious purity that would have made them absolutely respectable. When Jesus ate with tax collectors he crossed a line. The fact that he also ate with Pharisees was evidence that his popularity could not be ignored, even by the icons of religiosity that he criticized severely. Eating with Jesus transcended religion.

A person did not need to keep all the rules to be welcome at table with Jesus. Some other criterion applied. Look at us. This did not mean that the rules were irrelevant. The gospel of John makes a point of saying Jesus was obedient to his heavenly Father. In fact he came to take away the sins of the world (1:29).

He went to synagogue regularly. Jesus is not a rule-breaker or a scoff-law. Nor is he judgmental. He lets people judge themselves. When the light of the world shines, he says, some will run to the light and others will run to the darkness. So, eating with Jesus was not restricted to the people who were holy.

On occasion, these meals became mystical. Remember when Jesus feeds 5,000 people who have come to see him heal the sick. When they ask for more bread, he replies that he is the bread of life. "The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh (6:51)." When the disciples complain that they cannot understand this business about eating his flesh, he makes it clear that he is speaking spiritually: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless (6:53)," he says. It's as if every meal they ate, three times a day, they were making a meal with Jesus.

When they sat around the table for that first meal remembering their rabbi, their master, their minds could easily travel to the saying, "I am the bread of life." These are deep waters. As they passed the loaf around, John might have turned to the disciple next to him and said, "You know, this feels like fellowship with our Lord. We're having communion with him."

Peter replies, "Yes. This is the Lord's Supper."

"No," says the more literal-minded James. "We are breaking bread with each other in exactly the same way we have always eaten together. Let's give thanks."

Thus begins a two thousand year argument among the followers of Jesus. What shall we call this meal? And, what does it mean? Some will say that communion with Jesus is so real that he is physically present, but hidden from our sight. Others will object that the bread and cup only represent or symbolize the Lord. John Calvin split the difference and said that Jesus is spiritually present in a real way.

In the beginning of the church, the Apostle Paul says that the bread and cup were shared as part of a full meal. But, this proved awkward. At some point very early, what we call the sacrament became a formal part of worship. The fellowship meal or agape meal became a separate event. But, is it really separate and different?

Centuries ago when Mount Vesuvius erupted and the city of Pompeii was buried beneath the hot ash and lava, much of the city was preserved just as it was on the day of the eruption, frozen in time. Archeologists have found the remains of Pompeii to be a slice of life enabling them to learn details about ancient culture. Someone has speculated that if such a thing happened to American culture, archeologists in the future would examine the fellowship halls and kitchens in our churches and conclude that we must have worshiped with stainless steel altars and made burnt offerings to our God.

That's a little far-fetched, but it points up the importance of Christian fellowship. More important than what we call this sacrament, more important than the theology we use to understand it, more important than wine versus grape juice or whether the bread is leavened or store bought or little round wafers... more important than any of these arguments are the words of Jesus.

They are words spoken at table.

Words left for disciples to chew on.

Clear instructions that set the standard for real church.

A comforting connection between the earthly life of Jesus and the earthly life of those who follow after.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”