

## **The Politics at God's Table**

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ

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World Communion Sunday

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On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare  
a feast of rich food for all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine—  
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;

he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;

he will remove the disgrace of his people  
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

In that day they will say,

"Surely this is our God;

we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the LORD, we trusted in him;

let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Isaiah 25:6-9

How many of you are able to still get together for a family evening meal? I am sure most of you eat sometime late afternoon or early evening but how many of you still sit down as a family, share a meal, and catch up with each other about your day. The family dinner does seem to be a lost art.

There are different rules in different households about conduct around the dinner table. The table manners or practices can include such things as no elbows on the table, no belching, or "he who eats the fastest gets the most-est!"

In some ways our communion table is not so different. We have manners and practices about this table and hopefully our rules are consistent with the tradition but more importantly, I hope our practices are consistent with the new things the Spirit of God is doing in the world. I want to say more about this and I want to leave us with an image that I think is consistent with World Communion Sunday, but first let us summarize some of the tradition.

There are remnants of this original meaning in our current communion rituals. Let us understand communion along a continuum of meaning.

On one end of the continuum is the idea that the ritual is an ordinance, that is, we do it as Christians because Jesus told us to do it, and when we do this we are to remember the sacrifice of love he made for us. When I say this I am not emphasizing a blood sacrifice of atonement theology. Even though blood atonement is a part of Christian orthodoxy it is not the only way to understand the life and death of Jesus. I embrace this part of the meaning, this part of the continuum of meaning; because it is important to remember that when a person lives out such a radical and reckless love in a fear filled world, the world will make that person suffer for loving in such a way. Jesus knew this and did it anyway because his love was so great and he believed that the way of reckless love was the way of God. In relationship to history it looks backward to the past and calls us to remember, obey, watch out, and love as Jesus loved. Let us also understand that this end of the continuum has historically been emphasized by protestant and free-church traditions almost as a reaction to misunderstood and misrepresented sacramental understandings of communion. This brings up the other end of the continuum.

At the other end of the continuum is the idea of sacrament. While I understand the ordinance and its meaning I personally lean heavily to this side of the continuum. The sacramental understanding of communion means that the ritual and the elements of bread and wine (juice) are visible means of an invisible grace or work of the Spirit. In a sacramental understanding of communion God is spiritually present in a unique way and this is part of the mystery. Some Christians go so far as to believe that the bread and wine turn into the actual body and blood of Jesus. Others do not go so far as transubstantiation but nonetheless believe in an actual presence of some kind and in some way. In relationship to history the sacramental view of communion looks forward to the future. It looks to the day of the Great Banquet which is to come, and calls us to hope. The hope and grace received through this ritual unites God's people and empowers them to serve the world; to be poured out in a sacramental way for the sake of the world.

I think both meanings are at work in every congregation and in every individual depending on where they are in their own journey. However, there is something more powerful going on here and it is closer to the original meaning of the table, and it is an important cornerstone to progressive Christianity.

Dominic Crossen believes that the Christian Faith has its roots in table practices. To be more precise, the Christian Faith has its roots in the breaking of the rules of common table practices and making new rules.

*According to the Gospels shared meals were one of the most distinctive features of Jesus' public activity. He often taught at meals, banquets were topics of his parables, and his meal practice was often criticized by his opponents. Scribes and Pharisees aggressively ask, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" The issue is that Jesus eats with "undesirables", the marginalized and outcasts, in a society in which the people with whom one shared a meal was hugely significant. Jesus' meal practice was about inclusion in a society with sharp boundaries. It had both religious and political significance; religious because it was done in the name of the kingdom of God; political*

*because it was done in the name of the kingdom of God in which a very different vision of society was affirmed. (The Last Week of Jesus, p. 113-114. Borg and Crossen)*

In essence Jesus was saying, “If you want to know what the world is supposed to be like then look at what I am doing here at the table.”

We could hold a yearly wedding banquet for all the couples which have committed themselves to love, honor and cherish each other. At this party we would celebrate and honor the vows they exchanged and we would acknowledge the rightness of what it means for two people to commit themselves to the spiritual enterprise of honoring each other’s uniqueness and yet at the same time build one life together. This banquet would include all couples; straight and gay. Unfortunately, there would be some people who would not come but let us be clear; we did not exclude them, they excluded themselves. So, with the empty seats we fill the places at the table with the poor, the people without health care, the immigrant, and the homeless. Our table practices should affirm a very different vision of society as well. You see how the table practices of Jesus works and you may begin to see why his open table practices got him in so much trouble.

*But the meals were not just about inclusion. They were also, and crucially, about food. The meals of Jesus were not ritual meals in which food had only or primarily symbolic meaning. They were real meals, not a morsel and a sip as in our observance of the Eucharist. For Jesus, real food---bread---mattered. In his teaching, “bread” symbolized the material basis of existence, as in the prayer of Jesus. Immediately after the petition “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven”, is “Give us this day our daily bread”. For Jesus’ peasant audience, bread---enough food for the day---was one of the two central survival issues of their lives (the other was debt). The Last Supper continues and culminates in Jesus’ emphasis upon meals and food as God’s justice. (The Last Week of Jesus, p. 113-114. Borg and Crossen)*

Again I say, you see how the table practices of Jesus works and you may begin to see why his open table practices got him in so much trouble. Communion shapes communities. The table practice of Jesus makes our communion table a table of inclusive love and justice.

Daniel tells the story about him and his friends trying to sit at the lunch tables of the most popular kids. The popular kids complained so loudly that the adult lunch monitors came over and chastised Daniel and his friends for “causing trouble” because after all, everyone knows “the rules”. Communion shapes communities.

Think about the times and places where we impose rules about who gets to sit at the table. Communion shapes communities.

No shirt—no shoes—no service—no exceptions. Communion shapes communities.

There was a time in our history when people of darker skin were not allowed the communion of the lunch counter or the same drinking fountain. Communion shapes communities.

We still live in a time when people are cut-off and not allowed at the tables of power.

We live in a country where we may say you can come to this table of healing but you are cut off from the tables of health care. Communion shapes communities.

We live in a world where we may say you can come to this table of peace but you are cut off from the tables of negotiation. Communion shapes communities.

We may invite the immigrant, homeless, and the poor to this table of spiritual abundance but cut them off from our tables of material abundance. Communion shapes communities.

When we separate the table of inclusive love from the table of justice, then we are no different than the slave owner who uses the Bible to justify slavery. When we separate the table of inclusive love from the table of justice then we make it a table of nothing for no one. But today, is the day when we proclaim to the world that this table is God's table and it is a table for all the people.

Over the past month we have been talking about households and the politics of our various households. Now imagine this. We live in the household of God which is the household of this planet. In this household there is a table and it is God's table. According to our faith this table is a table of abundance, grace and love and everyone is invited because it is God's table.

It is not the table of the Church

It is not the table of the United States.

It is God's table and we in our own particular time and place can act out what is the reality of God in the universe. On World Communion Sunday we transcend the distances of time and space and join together in an Eternal Now for the sake of reminding ourselves of the love and justice of God which unites us and compels us to serve the world.

In the first church I served I was able to perform a wedding for a couple who had been living together for many years. They had a nine year old daughter named Elizabeth. They wanted a small and quiet wedding ceremony with only themselves and their parents present. They also wanted communion to be a part of their ceremony. One set of parents was Catholic and the other set was Baptist. On the one hand they are on opposite ends of the theological spectrum but when it comes to communion they both represent exclusive positions. I informed both sets of parents and invited them to participate in communion before the wedding started and they both declined as they wanted to honor their own traditions. We started the ceremony and when Elizabeth's parents faced each other, held hands, and exchanged vows, Elizabeth started to cry and through her tears she said, "I have wanted this my whole life." All of us were so moved we had to stop and take a deep breath. After the vows Elizabeth held the cup and the bread for her parents and they

shared communion. Without any prompting Elizabeth's grandparents stepped up to her and they took the bread and the wine as well. The spirit was at work in such a powerful way that no one could resist the invitation or the love feast. In that moment there were no Baptists or Catholics. There was only love and grace. Communion shapes communities.

The shaping of communities, the ordering of our households, is the practice by which we agree to be loving and just, personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements - indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life together. In a powerful sense, then, communion is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society. Our communion and World Communion Sunday hold up a different political and spiritual vision of the world.