

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Who's Hosting This Meal?**

Matthew 26:17-30

Suppose you got an invitation in the mail that read: "Dear brother or sister in Christ, You are invited to a meal hosted by Jesus next Sunday at 11:00 AM in the sanctuary of Grace Baptist Church. The purpose of this meal is to remember Jesus' death for our sins and to rejoice in his risen life among us. Our Lord has made extensive preparations for this gathering and is eager to have you join us at the table as we remember and celebrate the victory that is ours through him. We hope to see you at the Lord's Table on Sunday."

Well, here you are. Though no such invitation arrived in your mailbox, you've still come. You've come because this is what you do on Sunday. You worship with God's people. You go to the house of the Lord. And like most houses, this one has a table. In this case, it's a table set in remembrance of Jesus.

When we hear the phrase, "in remembrance of Jesus," our minds naturally start thinking back, focusing on the past. We recall and reflect on what God has already done for us through the cross. But the Lord's Supper, while it is a memorial of Christ's suffering and death, is also supposed to be an experience of his risen life among us now. Somber and careful self-examination is necessary when coming to the Lord's Table. But so is celebration. The communion service is a service of joy. Though we who gather around the Lord's Table are sinners, we are redeemed sinners. And we await full redemption when Christ comes again.

In the meantime, Christ is doing what he did with his first disciples. He's calling us to take our places at the table with him. He desires fellowship with us just as much as he desired fellowship with them. When we consider how meals and table fellowship were such a crucial part of Jesus' life and ministry, signifying and embodying the reign of God, we can begin to understand why Jesus still desires to be at the table with us.

One preacher recalls the first time he was asked to teach a seminary class about Communion. He went to an older colleague and said, "How shall I begin? What should I do?" The older colleague said, "The first thing you must do is go to a kitchen and learn how to cook." The preacher said, "Why should I learn how to cook if all I want to do is to teach the meaning of Communion?" "Ah," said his older colleague, "you must know this. You will never be able to understand the meaning of Communion until you know the love of cooking and the joy of those who are satisfied."

Because we've become so formal and precise in the way we observe the Lord's Supper, we easily forget that that upper room meal was just that, a meal, filled with eating and drinking, friendship and conversation. True, the Passover meal had its share of formality. It was an occasion to remember and participate in the freedom of God's people who had been brought out of Egyptian bondage. But the formality never extinguished the joy of being among the redeemed.

As you participate in the service of communion, how do you picture Jesus? How would you describe the Jesus you meet at the Lord's Table? Do you picture Jesus on his knees, wrestling in prayer in Gethsemane? Do you picture Jesus being beaten and tortured on his agonizing journey to Calvary? Do you picture Jesus suffering on the cross, twisting in pain and gasping for breath as he bears the weight of our sin? Do you picture his dead, limp body hanging there between two thieves? Do you picture Jesus as the risen Lord, sitting at the right hand of the heavenly Father, reigning over all the things that try to separate us from his love and hinder God's purposes in the world?

These images certainly speak to us about what Christ has done, is doing, and will do for us. But let me also ask you, when you participate in the service of communion, do you ever picture Jesus as your host at the table? Do you see him leaning over and passing you the bread so you can eat? Do you see him carefully handing you the cup so you can take a drink?

I know that you see me hand the plate to a deacon, who hands the plate to the person at the end of your pew, who hands it to the next person, and the next person, until it arrives at you. But where does this all start? Does it start with the company that manufactures the prepackaged juice and wafer sets? Does it start with selecting the Scriptures and music for the communion service? Does it start with determining which deacons will be serving the bread and the cup?

Though all these are important pieces of our preparation for communion, the fact is that this act of worship begins in the heart of our Lord. He's the one who stayed the course that led to his suffering and crucifixion for us. He's the one who directed his disciples to go and prepare the Passover. He's the one who took the bread and wine, which signified Israel's rescue from slavery, and identified himself with them, thus declaring that he himself, in his death, will deliver humankind from all its bondage. He's the one who handed the bread and cup to his disciples, then handed himself over to death so that we could be forgiven and set free for new life in the reign of God.

Though each of us has a part to play in the Lord's Supper, the bottom line is that we are all guests. Let's not forget that it is the *Lord's Supper*, the *Lord's Table*. He's the one who invites the guests. He's the one who welcomes the guests. The openness and receptiveness that we show toward one another is simply a manifestation of our Lord's hospitality and friendship.

The story is told about a nomad who was being pursued across the desert by his enemies. He came upon an encampment. In desperation, he rushed up to the tents, hoping that these strangers would receive him. He threw back the curtains and realized that the inhabitants had just begun to eat. As he struggles to catch his breath, he looks into their faces. Will they receive him or turn him away? They motion for him to enter and be seated. Eventually his pursuers reached the camp and went to the tent he had entered. They threw back the curtains, ready to seize the man and kill him. But when they saw him seated at the table, they drew back and left him in peace, for they knew that in the Near East it was a great act of hostility toward the host to trouble a person who is seated at someone's table.<sup>1</sup>

The psalmist says of God, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies (Ps. 23:1, 4-5a, RSV).

Today, the Lord has prepared a table for you. Sin and death have been defeated. God has reconciled you to himself and to others. Forgiveness is available to you through the cross. Victory has been secured through Jesus Christ. He himself is the host of this meal. Remember that the Lord's Supper is not something the church serves. It's something that Jesus gives.

I once came across a church website that captures it well. The name of this congregation was The Lord's Table. At first, I thought I had missed something. Shouldn't the word "church" appear somewhere in the congregation's name, along with a more specific category like Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and so on? After pointing and clicking my way through several pages of the site, I came back to where I had started. This church is called The Lord's Table. And its motto is, "Where spiritual hunger is fed, and the fed are spiritually hungry." A good description of what the church is all about.

As we gather at the Lord's table today, I hope you've come spiritually hungry. I hope you have an appetite for the presence of Jesus. He says, "Take and eat; this is my body. ... Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant..." (26:26-28). He's here not just to give us food and drink, but most of all to give us himself.

In the story and film, *Babette's Feast*, two elderly and pious sisters live in a small village on the western coast of Denmark. Their father was a pastor who founded a strict and austere religious community that has dwindled over time due to no new converts. At present, the aging congregation is going through a difficult time of bickering and division. One day, a talented chef named Babette shows up at the sisters' door as a refugee from political turmoil in Paris. She carries a letter of recommendation from a suitor one of the sisters had previously known. The sisters can't afford to take Babette in for free, so she offers to work as a housekeeper. For fourteen years, Babette prepares meals for them. All the meals are in keeping with the religious community's spirit of austerity and self-denial. So every night, Babette prepares boiled fish and potatoes for them, because they recall that Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day Babette learns that she has won the lottery in Paris. Instead of returning to the city and using the money to enjoy her lost lifestyle, she decides to spend the wealth to prepare a magnificent feast for the sisters and the entire congregation. At first the townspeople refuse, but finally relent.

Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. As one preacher has summarized it:

The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine: Veuve Cliquot 1860, the finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, *love one another*?" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

The preacher rightly goes on to ask, "Can you think of anyone else who gave his all to make us a loving community through the gift of a meal?"<sup>2</sup>

At the conclusion of today's text from Matthew, Jesus points us forward to the day when God's kingdom comes in its fullness and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. On that day when the Father's kingdom is complete, something wonderful will take place. Christ will spread the greatest banquet ever seen, and people from all nations will be welcomed and included. Our Lord Jesus will prepare a table and host the world. Until then, he has prepared this table, in this house of worship, in this part of the world, as a sign of God's eternal mercy, love, and hospitality. This is the Lord's Supper. He is our host. And he welcomes all who come to him in faith, and whose faith is manifested in a life of love for others.

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1981)16.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Pentz, in the sermon "The Gourmet God." Peachtree Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia (November 23, 2003).