

Last Sunday I invited everyone to think of a memorable meal—what you ate, where you were, and who you were with you. I said last week that eating is so much more than a sensory experience, often it's a relational one.

I want to begin this morning by sharing a memorable meal that I've had, but instead of highlighting the food, I want to draw your attention to the relationship that was shaped over the course of the meal.

On a sunny, Spring, morning in 1998, I found myself seated on the patio of an ocean-side restaurant—the Marina Grill. Seated across from me were my future in-laws; at least I hoped they would be my in-laws one day. There was just one small detail standing in the way; I hadn't actually asked them for Naomi's hand in marriage yet.

It was just the three of us that morning, Naomi had come up with an excuse for why she couldn't join us for breakfast. I remember there being a nervousness around the table that morning, and it wasn't coming from them. I knew that I was going to ask for their blessing, they knew I was going to ask for their blessing, but it took most of the meal before I worked up the courage to broach the conversation.

What if they said "no"? Naomi and I had been dating for less than six months. *What if they said I wasn't good enough for their daughter?* If they had, I wouldn't have blamed them, in fact, I probably would have agreed with them. And so I sat there, fidgeting, sweating, and pushing food around my plate.

The moment of no return eventually came; I told them I loved their daughter and wanted to marry her. They gave me their blessing and the welcome I received was loving, warm, and generous. That meal took place nearly 20 years ago. I don't remember what I ate, but I do remember their welcome; on that day, a new kind relationship formed and has deepened as the years go by.

Last Sunday I began a new teaching series on the meaning of the Lord's Supper; each week one of our staff team will open the Scriptures and explore one particular emphases of this Holy Meal. Last week I talked the Lord's Supper in terms of Remembrance, this week we will look at the Lord's Supper in terms of **Communion with God and Others**.

I'm going to spend the bulk of my sermon focussed on the Lord's Supper but I want to set this meal in the context of the many other meals that Jesus shared with friends, followers, outcasts, and enemies. While people didn't know it, whenever they shared a meal with Jesus, they were eating in the presence of God. And so, these meals they shared with Jesus reveal a lot about communion with God and others.

Let's take a brief look at some of these meals, beginning with the meal He shared with Matthew and his friends.¹ Jesus had been in a home, teaching, when a paralyzed man was brought to Him by four friends. After healing the man, Jesus left the house and along the way He saw Matthew—a tax collector.

¹ Matthew 9:9-13.

Jewish tax collectors were despised in Jesus' day; they used Rome's authority to extort money from their own people. They made a good living, but they lived isolated, lonely, lives as a result. When Jesus saw Matthew, He invited him to join His inner circle of disciples; later, Jesus joined Matthew and his tax collector friends to share a meal. The religious leaders were appalled. From their perspective, sinful people were a contamination to be avoided; you didn't share a meal with people of questionable character. Jesus' perspective was exactly opposite—in sharing His life with others, Jesus hosted people in need of healing and transformation.

Another story can be found in Luke 7:36-50. One of the religious leaders, Simon, invited Jesus to his house to share a meal. One of the women from the town—an outcast, a woman of questionable character and behaviour—learned where Jesus was eating and she came into the house uninvited. She came with a jar of very expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus feet, and dried His feet with her hair.

Her actions that night was socially unacceptable; her sinful past meant that she herself was unacceptable. Observing this woman, Simon thought to himself, *“If [Jesus] were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”* His mistake was in assuming that Jesus didn't know any better...that Jesus would have dismissed the woman if He knew who she really was. The truth is, that Jesus saw the woman as she was and welcomed her anyway. *“Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’”*

² Matthew 11:19.

³ Luke 22:15.

Because of the company that Jesus regularly kept, the religious leaders began to refer to Him as a “glutton and a drunkard”.² On another occasion, while Jesus was passing through Jericho, He decided to share a meal with one of the least regarded people in town. Zacchaeus was the Chief Tax Collector and a rip-off-artist extraordinaire. In fact, Luke 19:7 says that when the people saw that Jesus was going to his house they *“began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’”*

Now Jesus wasn't the host at any of these meals I've just mentioned, but if we were to do a quick assessment, based on these stories, who would you say Jesus would welcome at *His* table?

It seems to me that we would have to conclude that **anyone and everyone would be welcome**. Much to the chagrin of religious people then—and now—Jesus' standards appear to be quite low; **He will eat with anyone—everyone is welcome**. *And do we not see this same reality at the Last Supper itself?*

At the Last Supper, Jesus didn't dine with the spiritually elite—those sinless few who had climbed to the dizzying heights of holiness. He ate with twelve men, who in a matter of hours, would either betray, deny, or abandon Him. But knowing all of this, Jesus said to His disciples, *“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”*³ Jesus willingly, lovingly, welcomed those who would soon reject Him. More than any other meal, the Last Supper was an act of loving, generous, welcome.

When you think about God, is this the image that comes to mind—loving, generous, welcoming? When you think about the Lord's Supper, do you sense the loving, generous, welcome of God? We'll come back to this question later, but for now let me invite you to turn with me to the first of two texts we will look at together, beginning with 1 Corinthians 10:14-21.

1. Communion With God (1 Corinthians 10:14-21): Paul's letter to the Corinthians is the only place in which he outlines the meaning of the Lord's Supper; if it weren't for the Corinthian abuses of this meal, Paul might not have written on this subject at all. What we have here isn't a "how-to" on the Lord's Supper, it's more of a "*stop-doing-what-you're-doing*." In any event, these texts go a long way in revealing the meaning of this holy meal.

Paul was writing within a non-Jewish culture that regularly practiced sacred, pagan, meals; which is to say, the entire community would gather to eat and drink at festive meals that were held in honour of the gods. Upon becoming Christians, people were faced with a dilemma—*can we continue to eat these meals, now that we follow Jesus?* It appears a number of the Corinthians Christians were eating the Lord's Supper, *and*, continued to eat these pagan meals as well.

Let's take a closer look at what Paul wrote, "**14** *Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry...* **16** *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a **participation** in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a **participation** in the body of Christ?"*

In vs. 20-21 Paul writes, "*the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be **participants** with demons.* **21** *You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of*

demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons."

If you have ever wondered why some people refer to the Lord's Supper as "Holy Communion," look no further; the term comes from vs. 16. Here Paul refers to eating the Lord's Supper as a **participation** in the blood and body of Christ.

The word translated "participation," comes from the Greek word *koinonia*. The word *koinonia* conveys the sense of close relationship or union; when used in the New Testament, it often refers to the truth that we have been united to Christ, resulting in communion with God.

Think for a moment about power of meals. There's nothing magical about sharing a pot of soup, or dividing up that last Yorkshire Pudding—the power isn't in the food, it's in the connection and communication with the people at the table. To eat with others is to enter into relationship with them. To eat the Lord's Supper is to commune with God. In the same way, to eat a sacred, pagan, meal was to commune with—or, relate to—the demonic spirits that were present.

In the Middle Ages, the Lord's Supper was understood in a quasi-magical light; as though the bread and wine had a power to save in and of itself. This is not the case; the power of this Meal isn't in the food, it's in the One who Hosts us—the power lies in the One with whom we commune. This is Christ's Meal, He is our Host, present by the Holy Spirit. This is the heart of the word *koinonia*—participation, fellowship, communion.

As I said last week, there is nothing so central to Christianity as the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. At times the Bible describes sin as the breaking of God's law, which results in a legal guilt. There are things we should have done but haven't; there are things we should not have done but have. We stand accused but without defence—we are guilty as charged. But the good news is that at the cross, God, in Christ, has taken the guilt upon Himself—the penalty for our wrong doing has fallen upon Jesus and we have been pardoned.

Communion with God becomes possible when we accept the forgiveness won by Christ at the cross; forgiveness leads to His welcoming embrace. Romans 5:1-2 says, *“we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”*

Colossians 3:3 reminds us that we have been united to Christ in His death and resurrection and our life is now *“hidden with Christ in God.”* The Lord's Supper does not create a connection with God. Instead, this Meal reminds us that we have *already* been united with Christ, and it strengthens our communion.

2. Communion With Others (1 Corinthians 11:17-34): At this time I want to move on to our second text, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. If the first text focuses primarily on our communion with God, this second text has a lot to say about how communion with God affects our communion with one another. Once again, Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper is framed in terms of *“stop-doing-what-you're-doing.”* Let's take a closer look.

Paul writes, *“17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.”* And with a touch of sarcasm, Paul goes on to say, *“19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. 22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?”*

Paul was outraged, and rightly so—their practice of the Lord's Supper wasn't uniting the church family, it was creating division and hostility among them. What exactly was going on?

In Paul's day, the divide between rich and poor was more vast, and nuanced, than it is today. Many of the poor in Paul's day were slaves and didn't have the basic human rights that we take for granted today: the right to vote, the right to education, the right to healthcare. As the message of Jesus spread, the diversity present among the Christian Church was unparalleled, and unthinkable, in Greco-Roman society. No other social group made room for men and women, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free.

In forming the Church, Jesus' vision was always of a new humanity where the former gender, racial, and economic boundaries were eclipsed. But in a society where people were constantly divided along these lines, old habits died hard. The early churches met in homes and only the wealthiest members had homes that could house the group.

We know from archeological evidence that homes tended to have a small dining room that could only seat 10-12 guests, which meant that in the case of a larger gathering, the rest would eat in a large courtyard which could seat between 30-50 people. *In a culture dominated by social hierarchies, who do you think the host would invite to join him in the dining room?* It's more than likely that he would invite those who belonged to the same social class—the wealthy, the influential, the powerful, ate inside, and the rest were on the outside looking in.⁴ We also know that those who ate at the privileged table received both a larger quantity, and, a better quality of food.⁵

Bringing all of this together helps to form a picture of what was taking place. The Church would come together for worship, prayer, and teaching; they would also celebrate the Lord's Supper. But when they came together, the rich would gather inside to eat their own private meal, while the rest remained outside—hungry, watching.

Paul was outraged because this behaviour threatened the very fabric of the Christian message—it was creating a two-tiered church of “have's” and have-not's”. At the foot of the cross the ground is level; all the social, racial, and economic barriers are flattened. All of us are equally in need of God's mercy and grace; none of us earn forgiveness based on personal merit.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, 533-534.

⁵ Fee, 541-542.

⁶ Romans 3:23; Galatians 3:26-27.

The Apostle Paul writes, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”⁶

The Corinthian abuse undercut the meaning of the Meal. It is the **Lord's** Supper. **He** hosts us at **His** Meal so that we can enter into communion with God and one another. The Meal that was supposed to unite the Corinthians, was instead multiplying division.

Before we move on from 1 Corinthians 11, I want to draw your attention to verses 27-34. Sadly, while these words are well-known within the church, they have been frequently divorced from their context, and consequently they have been misunderstood and misapplied, causing fear and guilt among many.

Let me return to the question I asked earlier: *when you think about God, what image comes to mind? Do you see Him as loving, generous, and welcoming? When you think about the Lord's Supper, do you sense the loving, generous, welcome of God?* Many do not, based on a misreading of vs. 27-34.

“27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.”

When I was younger, I wasn't taught to think of the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to commune with God, nor did I think about this Table in terms of mercy. For me—and for many others—this was a Table of Judgement. Each time we celebrated the Lord's Supper, verses 17-21 were ignored, but vs. 27-29 were highlighted. We were told about the danger of eating this meal in an unworthy manner, and then invited to engage in a private, moral, examination to determine whether or not we were worthy to eat.

The problem was that I never felt worthy—there was always sin of some kind in my life. And I was led to believe that if I was in any doubt about whether I was worthy enough to eat, it was better not to participate in this meal—just in case I ended up eating and drinking God's judgement on myself.

Let's think about that for just a moment. If participation in this meal comes down to our worthiness, *is there any among us who are worthy? Any who have managed to remain sin-free this week? Have you managed to do—with joy—everything God has asked of you this week? And have you managed—with joy—to avoid everything God asked of you this week? Have you loved God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength this week?*

Listen...no one is worthy to commune with God, but isn't that why Jesus came and died on the cross? All those meals that Jesus ate—with Matthew, with Zacchaeus, with Mary Magdalene, and the disciples—all of those meals teach us that communion with God isn't secured on the basis of our performance; communion only comes on the basis of God's mercy. Think about who Jesus sat down to eat with; He shared meals with **anyone and everyone who was willing to come and receive.**

When we come to this table, we need to recognize that do not come alone—we come with brothers and sisters in Christ. The Lord's Supper is a meal in which we commune with God, **and**, one another. The “discerning” Paul talked about was not a private, moral, examination; the disregard of the rich for the poor, meant that they were eating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

All of us enter the Christian faith as individuals; our mother's, father's, or grandparent's faith won't do—it's your personal confession of faith in Christ that activates the forgiveness He offers. That being said, the moment you place your trust in Christ, you are adopted into God's family; spiritually speaking, you are not an “only child”—you are surrounded by brothers and sisters. Your communion with Jesus is meant to affect the way you relate to others, **and**, your communion with others affects the way you relate to Jesus.

Our communion with Christ has been compromised when we praise God on Sunday, and curse our classmate, neighbour, or co-worker on Monday.⁷ We have misunderstood God's great love, His mercy, His sacrifice, when we claim it for ourselves, and then treat others with

⁷ James 3:9-10; c.f. James 2:1-8.

contempt.⁸ The Corinthians were doing just that; I wonder, are we guilty of doing the same?

In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus said, “*if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*” All of us experience the pain of strained relationships—with friends, family, neighbours, classmates; none of us will ever come to the Lord's Supper with relationships that are perfectly whole. But here, in Holy Communion, we are reminded that God longs for our relationships to be reconciled.

Romans 12:18 says, “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*” It isn't always possible—it takes two in order to live in peace. Perhaps today you are keenly aware of a personal relationship that needs to be reconciled. Resolve today, by the grace of God, to do all that you can to live in peace with this person. As you eat Holy Communion today, do so remembering that this is a Table of Mercy—for you, and for the one from whom you are estranged.

This is Jesus' meal, He is our Host, and He is present among us by the Holy Spirit. We can only come to this table because of His loving, generous, welcome. This is the Table of Mercy. We come to commune with Him, and in so doing we are strengthened to live in communion with others.

Instructions for Communion: At this time I want to invite the worship team to come and join me on stage, and as they do, allow me to offer a few, brief instructions.

In just a few moments the band is going to play instrumentally, and I'd like to invite each of you to remain seated. Take the next few minutes to reflect upon, and thank Jesus for, the loving, generous, welcome He has extended to you. And perhaps as you celebrate the truth that you have been reconciled to God, you want to name a person you long to be reconciled to God, and/or to you.

After a few minutes of instrumental music, Rich and the team will begin to sing, at that time those who are serving will come forward and take their place. We will have three serving station up front, and one/two in the balcony. I'm going to invite people to come forward, row by row, beginning with the back row. As each row is served, the next row can come forward to receive.

As you wait for your turn to come forward, feel free to reflect on Jesus, or to listen for what Jesus might say to you; you can also feel free to join the team in singing.

As you come forward to receive, the servers will invite you to tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and then eat with thanksgiving.

At this time, I'm going to turn things over to Rich, and invite you to take the next few moments to reflect on, and listen to, Jesus.

Worship

⁸ 1 John 4:20-21; c.f. Matthew 22:37-40.

Benediction