

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

April 6, 2023 – MAUNDY THURSDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Dining with Jesus*”

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14	(The Lord establishes the Passover)
Psalms 116:1, 10-17	(The Psalmist will lift up the cup of salvation, and fulfill his vows to the Lord)
1 Corinthians 11:23-32	(Paul teaches about the Lord's Supper: We are to receive the Eucharist with faith)
St. Luke 22:14-30	(Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper)

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It's been said that Jesus had a ministry of healing *and* “meal-ing.” In St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus goes from one meal to another! . . . . Hmm . . . reminds me of a late, very overweight cousin of mine . . . Jesus' enemies criticized Him for eating with anybody and *everybody!* He was particularly condemned for breaking bread with “tax collectors and sinners” [Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30]. In our time, that would be like Jesus dining with an aggressive IRS agent, or breaking bread with a filthy prostitute who might have AIDS. Yet, Jesus *did* share table fellowship with anyone and everyone, regardless of their class, gender, or station in life.

Our Lord also hosted meals . . . at the world's most famous picnic, He fed 5,000 hungry people. (And to think, I have trouble making dinner more than two!) Jesus also repeatedly compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a banquet [Matthew 22; Luke 12; 14]. That's a relief. I mean, could it be Heaven *without food?! I don't think so.* Sharing a meal is one of the most essential, intimate, and communal things we humans do with one another.

When families gather for the holidays—as many of us will this coming weekend—a major focus is the table, the feast. Meals are how we impress one another, get to know, bond with, and celebrate with each other. Often, the dinner table provides a context in which to announce momentous news—such as an engagement or a baby on the way. Meals are a prelude to travel and separation; a means of reunion; and a setting for breaking up or making up. My husband and I still joke, “you never know what a sandwich can lead to,” since our romance began the evening he shyly asked me to accompany him to “a place that makes really good ones”—Isaac's, on Centerville Road, in Lancaster.

In the ancient Jewish world, and even in modern-day Judaism, a primary place of worship was—and still is—the dinner table. When I was in high school, I spent a week with a friend of mine's family in Charleston, South Carolina. Donna's Aunt and Uncle were Orthodox Jews who kept Kosher, with two refrigerators to separate the meat from the dairy products, two sets of dishes, and two sets of cookware. What impressed me most wasn't her Aunt's cooking—which was delicious—but the beauty of the Friday night Sabbath worship. At sundown, the evening meal began when the lady of the house gracefully lit two candles, and offered prayers of thanksgiving to God. Then the man asked God's blessings on the bread and wine; and the family sang a hymn of praise. I imagined the scene at my friends' home was very much like the night Jesus and His disciples gathered in the Upper Room for His last supper on earth.

Jesus knew His time had come to leave them. Whenever either of my parents went away, they would always bring me a gift when they returned. Since I was fascinated by international dolls, often the gift would be a new doll for my collection. In families like mine, children develop the habit of asking, “Did you bring me something?” But what they really want to know is: “Did you remember me while you were gone?” And the parent's gift says, “While I was away, I remembered you. I was loving you even from a distance. This present is proof of my intention to return.”

In the gifts of bread and wine, Jesus is giving the ones He loves something by which to remember Him—and as a pledge of His imminent return. Our Lord is saying to them—and to us—“When I am gone, do this to remember me. And in doing this, you will also know that I am remembering you until I come back.”

We know that when a beloved person gives us a token of their affection, somehow their presence continues to accompany that gift. Whenever I look at my beautiful engagement ring, I feel Rick's commitment to me; the way it twinkles says to me again and again, "I love you, and want to be with you forever." In our culture, a ring signifies a covenant, particularly the covenant of marriage. But in ancient Israel, a marriage was agreed to by the giving and accepting of a cup of wine. The bridegroom's gift of the cup of wine to his intended, was a way of saying, "I offer you my love." If she accepted and drank from the cup, it was her way of responding, "I accept you, and I give you my life."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is using things from His tradition—everyday objects used in meals, in worship, and in marriage—to forge a new covenant with those who will accept Him, who will give Him their lives. Just as a bride and groom make promises to one another, Jesus offers His disciples a sacred pledge. He's promising the *very kingdom of heaven* to those who will stand by Him! In verse 30, Jesus pledges: "you will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom"—notice, once again, the context is a meal!

For their part, the disciples promise to stand by Jesus to the bitter end. Peter is the most vehement, as he declares, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you!" But what happened to the promises that each party made? God's Word assures us that Jesus is faithful in keeping His promises. But look how quickly the vows of the disciples evaporate: In Mark 14:66-71, we read in agonizing detail Peter's denial of Christ. St. Matthew's account is the briefest: [26:56]: "*Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.*" ALL the disciples . . . Like a faithless bride who forgets her vows the moment times become hard, Jesus' followers failed to keep their promises.

And that is because, as St. Paul, reminds us: "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" [Romans 5:23]. There's no way we are able to keep our promises to God under our own power! We need to have Jesus in us, and be open to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, in order to keep up our part of this covenant.

And what is Jesus' part? "My covenant is for the forgiveness of sins," He says. "That's why I'm giving you My body nailed to the cross, and my blood pouring from my hands, feet, and side. I'm going to be the lamb sacrificed for your sins, so you don't have to pay the price." In the ancient world, a groom paid a high price for his bride. But Jesus paid the *ultimate* price for HIS bride—for us, the Church. Romans 5:8 reminds us: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

In the past, church groups have asked me to teach on Communion—to explain it. But as John Calvin said of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, "I would rather experience it than understand it." Dear friends, the Eucharist is a mystery of the Holy Spirit. And in our lesson from First Corinthians, St. Paul reminds us that if all we're doing is munching on frankly tasteless bread and not the greatest vintage of wine, we're not really partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Without faith, we are not receiving Christ, and we miss all the benefits He intends for us in this Sacrament. Just a reminder: A Sacrament is a means of God's grace, in which the work of God's Holy Spirit actually changes us. That's why, as Anglicans, we believe that reconciliation, marriage, and ordination are also sacraments. In these acts of the heart and will, God's grace is poured out on us through the Holy Spirit, such that we are never the same afterwards.

- When we confess our sins and truly repent, God forgives us, and we commit to living differently.
- In Baptism, God seals us for eternity as His own, and we commit to belief in Christ and membership in His Church.
- In marriage, God makes us one with our mate, and we commit our lives to one another.
- In ordination, God empowers us for preaching, teaching, and healing, and we commit to serving God and His people in all that we do.

And in partaking of the Eucharist—which in Greek means “*thanksgiving*”—Jesus fills us with His Spirit of love and service, and we commit ourselves to following Our Lord. We allow ourselves to be transformed by His grace, to be forgiven by His mercy, and to lay our burdens at the foot of His cross. We come to the Table hungry, broken, needy, sinners.

As you prepare to receive, look at your hands. There’s nothing in them. They’re empty. You’re hungry. Jesus says, *come, take, eat, “I am the bread of life”* [John 6:35]. Jesus, the bread of heaven, gives us life, and life more abundant. The blood of Christ, makes possible our forgiveness and the gift of eternal life. Jesus is God’s deep, deep love made flesh. Just so, the bread and the wine are God’s grace incarnate.

We are invited, and we didn’t have to do anything: That’s grace! We are invited by Jesus—to meet Him here this evening, to feast with Him, to feed on Him until our deepest spiritual, emotional, and moral hungers are fed. We are invited along with the whole family of God—united with one another and with all the saints before and after us, in this central act of the Christian Church.

However, we are not to partake of this holy meal solely for the selfish purpose of being spiritually stuffed. I invite you, if you are comfortable doing so, to kneel before God’s altar this night—something we haven’t done for a long time—and imagine a stranger, perhaps even an enemy, communing next to you at the altar rail. Would you eat with them as Jesus did? Beyond that, imagine *offering* that stranger, that enemy, this bread and wine. Jesus calls us to offer Himself to the stranger and the enemy, to extend the feast of Heaven so that all whom *He* has invited can be fed.

Jesus was ‘into’ healing and “meal-ing.” Christ’s very invitation to salvation results in the reward of a meal. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me.” This evening, if we receive the cup with the faithful commitment as a bride saying, “I do” to her beloved, we shall dine with Jesus—and the benefits of this holy meal will be eternal. *Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

### **Let us pray:**

“God our Father, whose Son our Lord Jesus Christ, in a wonderful Sacrament has left us a memorial of His passion: Grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of his Body and Blood, that we may ever perceive within ourselves the fruit of His redemption; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.” (Adapt. BCP 252)

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. N. George Hacker, 1 April 2010, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill, NY. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. N. George Hacker, 12 April 2001, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD. Used with permission.