

The Table

© Hal Warlick, Blowing Rock Methodist Church , 9/28/14-- Communion

Mark 14: 16-26; John 13: 16-17

You can tell a lot about people by observing their eating habits. Some people eat most of their meals on trays in their den while watching television. Others get take-home lunches and dinners, and still others have nice retirement facilities that include a meal plan. Others go out to a restaurant or a club for most of their meals.

Most of the college students I ate with in recent years sat at round dining tables, but they did not talk to each other. They text messaged people who were not there or spent the meal time reading their e-mails. Currently, some churches try to appeal to that younger generation by having drive-through communion, where you drive up, get the elements and consume them in your car. In my opinion, a pale imitation of a McDonald's drive-through is not communion.

Amazingly enough, both Christians and Jews use meals around tables to instill memory of the history of their faith. For the Jews, it is the Seder or Passover meal. For the Christians, it is called communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper or the Last Supper of Jesus.

With my consciousness attuned to "tables," and my desire to delve into the meaning of the Lord's Table at the Last Supper, I decided to do some research. Fortunately, our town of High Point has The Bernice Bienenstock Furniture Library. It has more than 8,000 furniture and design specific volumes, and is the largest furniture specialty library in the world. The rare book collection contains volumes published since 1640 and includes a collection of the original works of 18th century furniture masters. This is one of the few, if not the only place in the world, where design professionals, scholars, students, and the public can don a pair of white gloves and examine the original works of the pioneer designers in the industry.

Did you ever stop to consider the fact that the history of the world could be written in terms of the important tables of the world? Think about it. There are the tables on which Shakespeare wrote his plays; the table where Leonardo da Vinci drew the first airplane. There is a huge table in West Orange, N.J., that Thomas Edison called his “think bench” where he conceived of the idea of the motion picture camera. There is the table where the Magna Carta was signed and the tables where the Declaration of Independence was signed; there are the tables on which treaties were signed to end the Civil War, the First and Second World Wars and all those other wars, as well.

Obviously, most of these tables in and of themselves are not as important as what goes on around them and on them. A table is what you make it. A church is what you make it. A life is what you make it. Jesus did not sanctify tables; he sanctified what went on around tables. In fact, he tried to wreck the tables of the money changers in the temple.

Of all the tables in history, none is more important to us than the one at which Jesus sat when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. No other table stands so centrally in our memory and in our devotion. But since a table itself is not as important as what we make it, the supreme question remains – what did Jesus do to make this table so special? For many years, I thought it was simply the piety involved. You know, the words of institution reminding us of the crucifixion: the body and the blood. But let’s look again and try to re-create that table scene. No other table has been so often depicted in the art of the world. But all those depictions, including that Last Supper painting by Leonardo da Vinci, got the table wrong. It was not a long table with the disciples sitting side by side.

First of all, the disciples had an argument about the seating arrangements. Some apparently felt they deserved to sit closer to the Master than the others. We have to recognize that in Jesus' day, the dining room was a hallmark of civility and social life. The table Jesus and his disciples ate at was horseshoe-shaped, like tables of the period. The tables were horseshoe shaped to allow servants to move up the center and take care of people. The guests reclined on couches around the outside of the table. John's 13th chapter contains these words regarding the Last Supper: "One of the disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus...lying thus close to the heart of Jesus."

This is very important because the *Illustrated History of Furniture* contains a sketch of a triclinium or dining table for Jesus' era. The host reclines on the extreme outside left of the horseshoe shaped table, and the guests of honor recline on the couch on the extreme outside right hand side of the table so they can be served first; the lesser important people sit around behind the table in the middle and get served last. The least important people are the servants who come and stand in the middle of the horseshoe and break the bread and pour the wine. The scriptures tell it like it was. Jesus Christ did not occupy the place of honor at the Last Supper. If someone's head was reclining on Jesus' chest, Jesus by his own choice was sitting with the people of lesser importance.

In addition, he took the slave's place as the one who served the bread and the cup. His words ring home: "For which is greater, one who sits at the table or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves." He then adds, "I assign to you as my father assigned to me, a kingdom that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom..."

That's an incredible image – a God who moves out of the way and gives you and me the position of honor at His table. That is something we can also do. The table of God is every bit a table of service as much as it is a table of piety. If all we see in God's table is a table of devotion and prayer, we have missed the totality of the message. Prayer and devotion without service and kindness is only a delusion. We need both at the table. It is so fitting that we close our season each year by coming to the table of God.

We have had devotion and worship here for 18 Sundays. But as we leave here, we go to serve God elsewhere; and a great portion of our offerings stays in this community so we can show kindness to people in need in the months that we are gone. Though they will never know it, they are our honored guests. Let us come to the table of Christ.