

In the communion liturgy that we will use this morning, it states: “This is not my food on this sacred table. I did not prepare it. It is not my blood, my body. It is the very life of Christ laid out here. I cannot tell Him, the One who constantly ate with sinners who is worthy to partake of it and who is not.” Throughout the Gospels, Jesus was constantly criticized by the religious leaders for eating with sinners and the socially unacceptable. Jesus was always willing to sit down and enjoy a meal with anybody no matter who they were or what their status in life was. This morning, let’s look at one such occasion that is recorded in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mathew, verses 9 through 13.

Read Matthew 9:9-13

Eating and drinking are not only essential for life, but also for fellowship. Human beings enjoy eating and drinking together; it is part of our nature. The English words “companion” and “company” both are formed from two Latin words meaning “those who share bread” with each other. People who regularly must eat alone often report diminished enjoyment of their food, and they sometimes suffer from poor nutrition for reasons that have nothing to do with economics. Thus, the desire to share a meal appears to be a universal human characteristic.

Furthermore, sharing a meal is also a common way of marking significant events in life. Marriages, births, and baptism are marked by dinners and receptions, as are birthdays and anniversaries of all kinds. A wedding without some form of eating and drinking included in it is impossible to comprehend. In the work place, many a business deal has been completed or celebrated over a meal; committees and discussion groups of all kinds regularly meet over lunch. I know that I’m looking forward to sharing hotdogs with some of you at the ballgame this afternoon and also at our church cookout on Friday May 26. In every culture we find the importance of sharing a meal together.

Eating and table fellowship played an important part in the ministry and life of Jesus. From the Gospel accounts we can see that Jesus truly enjoyed socializing with people; He loved to be around people. Some of Jesus’ most memorable teachings were around a table or at a meal. Recall His feeding of the 5,000, His attending the wedding banquet at Cana where He turned the water into wine so that the festivities would not be spoiled and the host embarrassed by lack of provisions, His celebrating the Lord’s Supper with His disciples on the night He was arrested, and His appearing to the two believers on the Road to Emmaus with whom He later broke bread.

Jesus was often criticized by the religious leaders of His day for sharing meals with the undesirables of society such as tax collectors like Matthew in our text for this morning and Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Tax collectors were hated by the Jewish people because they worked for

the Roman government and made their living by cheating people. Jesus offended others by eating in the home of Simon the Leper in Matthew 26:6. His disciples were also criticized because they did not fast and for violating the Law of Moses by picking corn on the Sabbath when they were hungry. Don't you just love it when people try to impose their personal beliefs and opinions on others in the name of religion?

However, in all of this, more was at stake than simple food and drink. At the beginning of His public ministry, when tempted by the devil for forty days in the wilderness, Jesus refused to turn the stones into bread even though He was hungry from fasting. This was a demonstration that Jesus was focused entirely on the ministry that God had given Him, on showing God's love to all His children, and bringing them into a closer personal relationship with God. He had been sent to restore the broken relationship between God and us by establishing a new covenant.

Certainly, for Jesus eating was never to be anything other than a sharing of God's love. Jesus' mealtime companions ran the gamut of society from socially unacceptable lepers and sinners to the respected, self-righteous Pharisees. Jesus shared meals with people from all walks of life, and thus demonstrated that God's love and grace are available to all who will come to the table. Everybody has the opportunity to pull up a chair and dine with Jesus. There are not, and should never be, any restrictions or limits placed on God's love and grace.

Thus, with eating playing such a major role in Jesus' ministry, it is not surprising that He would leave us with a holy meal. A meal in which God's grace is proclaimed to us through the sharing of the bread and the cup. The Lord's Supper is an opportunity for table fellowship, sharing, and communion. The Greek word for communion means "fellowship with," "participation in," or "sharing." The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 1:3 – "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." Christ is the head of the family, and we are all members of the family. He is the host at the Lord's Table, and we are all His guests, sharing in fellowship with Him. It is His table; we cannot tell Him who can and cannot participate.

Have you ever thought of it this way; that we are a family – a family united in our common belief in Jesus Christ? Have you ever traced your family tree? It branches off in many directions and we are in a way related to other families by marriage. My Aunt Sadie and Cousin Sonny each traced our family back to Wales. However, they differed on a certain John Thomas in South Carolina during the Revolutionary War. Aunt Sadie thought we were related to a Colonel John Thomas who was a respected officer when in reality Sonny was more correct in that we were related to a Sergeant John Thomas whose character was questionable. Let's face it; we all have questionable characters in our family tree. But Jesus demonstrated that all, even the questionable, are welcome to share a meal with Him. The point is that while some of us are related by bloodlines and DNA, as Christians we come to the table related and united by the blood of Christ that was shed for each one of us on Calvary.

In this family, there should be a oneness and unity. Indeed, the Church is defined as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:17 where it states: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." We who are many are one in Christ. Christ doesn't become fragmented in us; rather, we become unified in Him. We don't reduce Christ to what we are; He raises us to what He is. In Ephesians 4:4-6, the Apostle Paul underlines our oneness in fellowship when he wrote: "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope of your calling – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Now communion could be thought of as a family reunion. At a family reunion, families come together to celebrate their relationship and to renew the bond among them. They come from all sides of the family, the good and the bad; brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, in-laws and out-laws. All are welcome regardless of their social status; the invitation is extended to all who will come to the table. At most family reunions that I have gone to, we always spend some time rehashing the past family history, remembering the good times and those who have gone before us. I know Judy and I always have a good time visiting with family when we are back in South Carolina. One of the memorable ones was when I met my brothers at the best hotdog place in Clemson and had a great time of fellowship and enjoyed a lot of hotdogs that afternoon!

At the reunions we also take time to plan for the future when we will gather again for a family meal. Do you see where I am going? Once a month as we come to participate in Holy Communion, we come together as a family of believers. We read the family history from the Bible and follow the instructions of the Head of the family – "Do this in remembrance of me." We remember those who have gone before us. In a sense Holy Communion is a family meal shared with the Church of all ages, on earth and heaven. This is what it means when we state in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the communion of saints." Communion is the bond of grace between all Christians both living and dead. We come to share with Peter, James, John, Paul, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, and all those who have walked the path of righteousness before us.

And while we should remember the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ during communion, our focus should not always be on the past. Too often we treat Holy Communion like a funeral meal with gloom and long faces. I may have shared the story of Panama with you before. Panama was an Irish setter who was a guide dog for Barbara Hocker who was blind. She came to church every Sunday with Barbara in Grants. After Barbara died, her husband John was allowed to keep Panama. One Christmas Eve as we were taking communion, I looked up and here came John and Panama down the center aisle. And Panama's tale was swinging from

side-to-side. I thought that's the way we should approach communion with a smile on our face and our tails wagging from side-to-side.

In Revelation 3:20 the Risen Lord extends an open invitation to all when He said: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me." Here Jesus promises that anyone who opens the door to their heart and invites Him in, He will share a meal with them. In reality, communion is a prelude to what will happen when we all get to heaven. What a day of rejoicing it will be! Can't you visualize the banquet hall in heaven where we will all eat together in the presence of God? Imagine; sitting down at a table, eating with God! Surely the Lord's Supper offers us a glimpse of what it will be like to sit at the Lord's Table in glory and one magnificent family reunion.

As we gather for family reunions, we gather now as a family and as we are used to saying at our family reunions down South – "Let's eat!" Let us break bread together and share in the Cup of Salvation. Let's eat and drink and be reminded of God's awesome love for each member of His family. Approach the table in fellowship as a family – a family that gathers united in Jesus Christ and His love. May we each find fellowship, and may the presence of the Risen Lord be real to us in this holy meal that we are about to share. Come and be filled. Amen