

“The Greatest Meal Ever”

Luke 22:7-23

November 13, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever wondered why God made us so that so much effort and money must be expended in eating? He could have created us without the need to eat, but chose not to do so. Most of us get hungry at least three times a day, and the frequency of our need to eat leads to the fact that food structures our daily lives to a significant degree. Between planning menus, shopping for food, preparing the food and cleaning up after meals, much of each day is spent in this effort.

Meals are not just a burden structuring our daily lives; they are also a delightful enrichment of our lives. There is something uniquely pleasurable about eating a tasty dish. The enjoyment increases when eating is preceded by a hungry appetite. It is increased again when we eat with friends and family. Some of our most significant events in life are accompanied by eating. When a community comes together to join a man and woman in marriage, we make it a point to eat together as part of the celebration. No one would think of having a family reunion without planning the food to accompany such an event. There is something life-giving about a family coming together regularly to fellowship and catch up with the day's events over a meal.

There is a meal that is central to Christianity as well. We call it the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and today's passage speaks of how this meal began. We can see by Jesus' eagerness to eat it that this was a special meal. He says, **“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer”** (v. 15). The original language says literally, “with desire I have desired to eat.” Jesus had shared many meals with his disciples, and had likely shared other Passover meals with them. What made this one so special? What makes this even more strange is that this was Jesus' last meal, and he knew it. I don't know about you, but I don't think I would be eager to eat a meal I knew to be my last. Why was Jesus so eager to do so? I believe that when we know the answer to this question, we will have understood the Lord's Supper much better and will come to share in Jesus' joy with this meal.

Let me begin to explain Jesus' eagerness with a general comment, and then we will look at some of the specifics of this meal that help explain his eagerness. The general comment is that Jesus' eagerness is due to his joy in the gift he is about to give his disciples. He has been preparing for this occasion, and now it has arrived. It is like Christmas morning when you are about to give a loved one a gift you have spent much time, effort and money to provide, and you can't wait to give the gift. I rarely succeed in surprising my

wife with a Christmas gift, but one year I succeeded spectacularly in doing so. The gift I gave her took a good deal of planning on my part, and not a small amount of money. I arranged for her to travel to Chicago and spend several days with two of her college friends, and to attend a big art show that was in town for a while. The gift struck all the right chords for Wendy, including the adventure of travel, an art museum and time with friends. I was so eager to unveil the gift that I could hardly wait for Christmas to arrive. Jesus is here to unveil his gift to his disciples and to us, and its heart is found in the sacrament we call the Lord's Supper.

I. The Preparation for the Meal

Jesus unveiled his gift of this meal at the celebration of the Passover. Luke goes into some detail in describing the preparations needed for the Passover meal. Jesus sent Peter and John into the city to make the necessary preparations. Passover was the most popular of all the Jewish feasts, and it could only be celebrated in Jerusalem. So Jews from all over the nation streamed into Jerusalem at this time of year, swelling its population well beyond its normal level. Peter and John would first have to find a suitable location to celebrate. This would not be an easy thing to do, something like finding a hotel room in Tuscaloosa last weekend after the big game. But Jesus tells them exactly what to do. He says that they will see a man carrying a water jar, and they are to follow him to the place where the meal will be eaten. It would be easy to spot this person because normally only women would carry water jars. For a man to carry such an item would be like someone wearing a winter coat in Birmingham in July.

It is unclear whether Jesus accomplished these preparations by a supernatural act or by normal planning beforehand. It seems more likely to me that this is an example of Jesus' supernatural knowledge, but the point is the same in either case. Jesus acts with intentionality to prepare for this meal. All the disciples had to do was to show up and partake of the meal. Even Peter and John, who were asked to do more than the other disciples, only had to follow Jesus' directions. Jesus takes the leadership to supply this meal.

The significance of Jesus' leadership in providing for the Passover meal lies in the double meaning of the meal. On the surface, it is a Passover meal. This, of course, was the meal celebrating Israel's deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. God had announced through Moses that the tenth plague upon Egypt would be the death of the firstborn in every household. But there would be a way out. A lamb could be slain, and the blood of the lamb placed on the door of the house. When the avenging angel came to a house with the blood of the lamb on the doorpost, he would pass over that house. In every house throughout Egypt that night there would be a death—either the death of a firstborn son or the death of a lamb.

The New Testament is clear in finding a deeper meaning to this incident than a group of Jewish men celebrating yet another Passover. That deeper meaning is that Jesus is the true Passover Lamb. When Jesus is preparing this meal, he is not only thinking about the literal lamb, he is thinking about his own death. When Jesus died, his life wasn't taken from him; it was given by him. And he has done so with the eagerness of one who has been preparing a very special gift. He was excited to unveil this to the disciples, and he is excited to unveil it to us as well. Jesus has prepared a way of escape for us, that we might share with him the eternal joys of heaven.

II. The Content of the Meal

Let me comment here on three very familiar parts of the Lord's Supper. We want to look first at what Jesus means when he says that we are to do this in remembrance of him. Then we want to consider the eating of the bread and finally the drinking of the wine.

In studying this passage this week, I have come to the conclusion that the common understanding of the command to do this in remembrance of Jesus is incorrect. That common understanding is that Jesus is telling us here that we need to remember the centrality of his death as we partake of communion. While there is nothing wrong with doing so, and while it is certainly appropriate in communion that we do so, I don't think that's what is meant here. My conclusion is that the primary meaning here is not our remembering of Jesus' death, but God's remembering of his covenant. We are then comforted and strengthened as we remember that God will remember his promise to forgive us in Christ. A more accurate translation would be, "*Do this as my memorial.*" I have two reasons for this conclusion. First, the word translated *remembrance* in our versions could be translated *memorial*. This in fact is the way it is commonly used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Second, this idea of a memorial is confirmed by the use of this word to apply to the Old Testament sacrifices. For example, it is said of the Passover, using a form of this word, "**This day shall be for you a memorial day**" (Ex. 12:14). In the context of the Old Testament sacrifices, a memorial sacrifice was one that called upon God to remember his covenant promises. In other words, it's a reminder to us that God will be faithful. He never forgets his promise.

The promise God remembers is found in the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus, symbolized by the bread and the wine in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Let's look at these separately. The bread symbolizes the broken body of Jesus. "**And he took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you'**" (v. 19). Bread serves to strengthen and sustain life, and Jesus does that at great cost to himself. His body must be broken and his life lost in order for

us to be strengthened. But now, through his broken body, by faith we can eat the bread that brings eternal life. One of the applications of this is that it calls us to look to Jesus as our central need, just as we do to the eating of food. We would never think to substitute similar things for eating. For example, reading a cookbook is not the same as eating the food described in the cookbook. Looking at pictures of food cannot substitute for eating the food pictured. Jesus is the food we need for this life and the life to come. You don't need three steps to healthy relationships; you need to feed on Jesus and what he has done for you through his broken body on the cross.

Jesus then speaks of the wine. **“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”** (v. 20). Jesus calls it the new covenant because it brings about what the old covenant only pictured. The old covenant had many animal sacrifices, but none of them actually removed sin. The blood of Jesus does so. There is an old legend called the Holy Grail, which is the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. According to the legend, this cup has supernatural powers associated with it, so that anyone drinking from it will live forever. In a literal way, it's just a legend. But in the way that counts, it is true. Anyone who eats this bread and drinks will live forever. Jesus had said earlier, **“Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”** (John 6:54).

One of the most controversial statements in the history of the world is Jesus' statement in verse 19: **“This is my body.”** The Roman Catholic church understands that in a literal way, so that the bread is actually transformed in the real body of Jesus. Others teach that the Lord's Supper is nothing more than an illustration calling us to think and meditate on the death of Jesus. As Presbyterians, it is our theological heritage to take a middle way. We believe that Jesus is truly present in the sacrament, but in a spiritual rather than a literal way. We don't believe that the bread and wine is changed, but we do believe that Jesus sends his Spirit in a special way through this sacrament so that our hearts are changed. John Calvin says it like this:

Two faults must be avoided here. We must not think too little of the signs, separating them from their meaning; nor must we think too much of them, which can obscure the true mystery. There is some disagreement about the way we partake of Christ. Some say that eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood are nothing more than believing in Christ himself. But Christ himself seems to have gone further. He says that as we eat and drink, we truly partake of him. It is not simple knowledge of him.

III. The Fulfillment of the Meal

Speaking of this Passover meal, Jesus said, **“I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God”** (v. 16). The Lord's Supper looks forward to

the heavenly banquet. Jesus is drawing from a common teaching in the Bible that portrays our eternal life as a never-ending banquet. In the book of Revelation it is said like this: **“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”** (19:9). This image of a banquet is a powerful one, even more so in a culture not unfamiliar with hunger. The heavenly banquet speaks of more than food. We may not be so familiar with a chronic lack of food, but we are familiar with different kinds of hunger—the hunger of loneliness, the hunger of being stuck in a difficult marriage or an unsatisfying job. There is a heavenly banquet Jesus invites us to where none of these things will ever be present again. It is the banquet where the food will be the body and blood of the Passover Lamb, Jesus. He will satisfy all hunger forever.

This is intended by God to bring us great assurance. Notice that Jesus commands us, saying **“Take this”** (v. 17). In doing so, he makes it clear that it is ours. We are not taking something that doesn’t belong to us, but receiving something Jesus tells us to take. And when we eat of it, it becomes part of us. This pictures our union with Christ, by which, in a sense, we are part of Jesus. By this union, we belong at this heavenly banquet as much as Jesus himself.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with a very simple application. Jesus was eager to enjoy this meal, and we should be too. Jesus’ eagerness was not just for the fulfillment in the heavenly banquet, but also for the meal that looked forward to it. The application is to regard as a precious gift the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. God is inviting us over to his house for dinner, and it is a precious thing.

Steve Whitner was telling me this week of a conversation he had with another pastor about this pastor’s eagerness to come to the Lord’s table at a communion service taking place at one of our General Assemblies, the annual, national meeting of our denominational leaders. He was running a little late to the service, and by the time he arrived there was no more room. Many would respond with simple resignation to that fact, go back to the hotel room and read a book or watch a movie. But he responded with a sense of loss and a strong desire to be there (which he was able to do). He was eager to enjoy this meal with Jesus. We are called to the same eagerness.

There was someone present here who was not eager to share this meal with Jesus. The betrayer, Judas, was looking for an opportunity to turn Jesus over to the authorities. Instead of being hungry for Jesus, he was using Jesus. At most every communion service since this first one, there have been present some who are there not to receive and enjoy the grace of Jesus, but to use him for their own self-interests. Jesus invites all who are hungry for his grace. So even if your heart is riddled with self-interest, Jesus offers his broken body and shed blood for your healing and forgiveness. Be hungry for his grace.