

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Sacred Meal”
3rd in the series *Church Matters*
Isaiah 55: 1-2; John 6:35-37, 48-51; 1 Cor. 10:14-17
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Jesus and his followers gathered in the second floor of a small house in Jerusalem. He'd been planning this evening for sometime now. He knew what was coming. He knew it would be their last night together.

For three years he's been walking dusty roads full of ups and downs, traveling, teaching his group of followers, men and women. And now, the end is near. It's time to prepare them for his absence.

With all the wisdom of the cosmos available to him, you might expect him to finally make everything clear. Or to give them one more parable that surpasses all parables. Maybe give them scripture to keep in their hearts... or a theological truth to hold onto, to explain to them exactly what they need to know for the future. But he doesn't.

Of course, he knows they will be confused. And he knows they will need help along the way. He knows they are going to have so many questions about what is getting ready to take place. And he knows them well enough by now to know they're likely to be forgetful and unfaithful and make a mess of things at times.

But rather than give his disciples something to think about, or to memorize, or to ponder... Jesus gives them something to do.

something physical...

something to engage their bodies in... as if he trusts their bodies to be a better spiritual guide for them than their thinking.

“Do this,” he said –not *believe* this but *do* this – “in remembrance of me.”

His last great instruction to his disciples before his crucifixion, was to share in this sacred meal... trusting that this meal will teach them what they need to know when he's no longer around.

It counterintuitive for us who are still so influenced by the philosopher Descartes, **“I think therefore I am,”** as if the mind is the center of all understanding and knowing and truth. But the ancients knew something we've forgotten. Our reason fails us. Thinking is important, but it will only take us so far.

When it comes to the deepest mysteries, our physical bodies are often a better guide. In fact, a spiritual director that I was working with several years ago taught me that I have to learn to listen to my body... to pay attention to what it's saying.

Often my body knows that I'm stressed before I do. My body knows I'm starting to live an unhealthy rhythm before I do. It's there like tension in my shoulders or a knot in my gut.

And my body knows when I'm full of joy or encountering beauty... before I recognize it. My heart starts to beat faster, and I feel lighter.

At times, our physical bodies are guides for us... and often they can be guides into the deepest spiritual mysteries.

And let me just chase a rabbit trail for a moment: that's why our sexual ethics matter so much and the bible makes a big deal about them. A healthy sex life, in a covenant relationship, teaches us about belonging, and oneness, and spiritual union and profound intimacy. That's part of what it's created for. Whether or not you realize it, sex is spiritual... and when it's all cheapened, those mysterious truths and guides become twisted and wounding in some of the deepest places in our souls.

It matters what you do with your body. The body is sacred. The scriptures call it the temple of the Holy Spirit. So how you treat it and what you do with it matters. It is one of the most profound spiritual guides we have.

Even it's breaking down and falling apart is a guide. I had an email from my mom this week about my last living grandparent. He's gradually having more health problems. A few weeks ago he finally gave up his keys. This week he's gone from some hearing loss to major hearing loss. The doctors say there is little that a hearing aid can do because the nerves in the brain are atrophying. And now his memory is rapidly declining.

And I found myself reminded again that ***aging is the final great spiritual teacher.*** It requires us to learn how to let go and surrender... as if it's inviting us to finally surrender our very lives into the arms of the One who has been holding us all along the way, even though we may not have recognized it much of the time.

The body is a great spiritual teacher. It guides us in ways that nothing else can. Jesus knew this. So, on that last night, gathered there with his disciples, anticipating the mystery of cross and resurrection before them, Jesus doesn't explain to them what it will all mean. He gives them something physical to do... a way of being together that engages their bodies... trusting, that doing this, will continue to teach them all that they will need to know.

Do this... Do this in remembrance of me.

This broken bread... this is my body... take and eat.
This cup? ... this is my blood... drink it.

And they looked at him and must have thought... **“Well, that's just plain gross, Jesus.”** They were probably having flashbacks to that day in Capernaum when he told

the crowds that he is the bread of life... and that they were going to have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Pretty graphic stuff. It was more odd to their ears than to ours. In fact, so many were offended and grossed out that he lost the crowds that day.

But he stayed on message... and now he's saying it again. This is my body. This is my blood. Eat this. Drink this meal. Do it again and again and again.... in remembrance of me.

Well, later that night Jesus was arrested. After he was arrested, he was crucified. After he was crucified, rumors started to go around that he was alive. And the disciples are confused.

And two of them are on their way home from Jerusalem, confused and hurting from all that took place. And on the road they encounter a stranger... We read about this a few weeks ago.

After walking with him, who they invited him in to eat in their home, *and when they saw the way this stranger broke the bread and blessed it, they recognized who it was*. They recognized the resurrected Christ with them.

And so they run back to Jerusalem and tell the other disciples what happened. And they keep on meeting together... the followers of Jesus did... even after he was gone. More and more people joined them, Acts tells us.

And when they met together *they always broke bread together*... because this is what Jesus asked them to do... And not only that, but this is how Jesus was made present to them.

In fact church historians say that in the early days of the church, the sacred meal wasn't such a somber event. It was more like a feast. Their focus was less on his death and much more on **"his presence made palpable among his followers by the tastes, sounds and smells he loved."**¹

The joy of the noisy table, being shared among so many different people, made all the joy and the teachings, and the life of Jesus present to them again.

Growing up we had this ritual of eating at my grandma's house once a month with all my aunts and uncles and cousins. When you walked in her front door, the kitchen was just off the entry way to your right. So, the smell of the kitchen was always the first thing to hit you.

There was always roast beef, and dinner rolls and cinnamon rolls made from scratch just coming out of the oven, and pies cooling on the china cabinet. All of it was floating in the air.

¹ Rachel Held Evens, *Searching For Sunday*, 125.

The next thing to hit you was the crowd of people. My aunts giving out hugs. My cousins running around. There were about 20- or 30 of us crammed into her small house every time we gathered. So it was always crowded and loud.

There were hugs and laughter and all of us sat around two large tables in her home ... and I loved every minute of it.

So now, when I walk into someone's home, and smell fresh baked bread... and we sit down at a large table full of food and friends, young and old... it always takes me back to my grandma's house.

It's almost as if my Grandma's table is present now at any feast. Its as if she is there with us, just around the corner, pulling something delicious out of the oven.

In the beginning, every time the church met, they broke bread together. Because, the very gathering around the table was a remembering,... or better yet, a re-remembering... a bringing back together all the pieces of Jesus' life and story and presence. A re-remembering of Jesus.

Try to picture the early church doing that, gathering in some small Grecco-Roman home around the table that's been prepared for anyone that shows up.

And as someone walks down the street on their way there, they couldn't help but think about what things have been like since they were last at there....

how their commitments had grown fuzzy,
and all the moments they'd forgotten how to practice grace, or receive grace
and about the wreckage they'd been through... and the wreckage they created in the last week...

and all of the things that had consumed their minds and hearts in the last 6 days
and so they almost didn't come.

But when they get there, and the host welcomes them in, they could almost hear Jesus' voice the first time he told the story... of the son who had taken his father's inheritance and squandered it in a distant land... until finally he came back home, "*And The Father said to his servants, we must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!*"

And as the aroma of yeasty bread wafted around them. They breathed it in deeply and remembered his words, "*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, that a woman took and mixed into sixty pounds of flower until it worked all through the dough.*"

60 lbs of flower.

60 people in the room... gathered with the yeast of the kingdom being worked and worked into them.

And just smelling the warm bread made their stomachs rumble and their mouths water... and they heard him say it again, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.*"

And once everyone had gathered around the table, someone broke the bread and with deep gratitude they remembered his death and resurrection, his loved poured out and his life flowing back into the world... and they remembered, *“I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believe in me will never die.”*

They ate and drank and somehow in the process of being at the table all the pieces of Jesus’ life... all the many parts of this mystery came together again. They re-membered him.

And at the same time... something happened among them. Every time they shared the table, they seem to move from stranger to friend... It happens when you share a meal together doesn’t it?

They would move from unknown to known...

from disconnect from one another to inter-connected...

as if they themselves were separate members of a body that was being put back together.

At this sacred meal each week, they too were being re-membered.

Paul writes about this experience in his letter to the Corinthians: **“Aren’t we sharing in the blood and body of Christ? When we share at this table, we who are many become one body.”**

This sacred meal has been at the center of the Church’s life since the very beginning. At the center of faith, at the center of the Jesus story for thousands of years, has been a table.

But about 500 years ago, something changed. Rob Bell points out that instead of a table, the heart of our faith became a list.. a list of our beliefs. Of what we do and don’t believe. Yes, beliefs are incredibly important! But it wasn’t until the time of the enlightenment that a list became central.²

Before long you’ve got this group that has their 9 things, and this group over here that has their 11 things, and this group that has their 13 things, which is different than 9 things, so they have to move down the street and start their own church.

Sound Familiar? Welcome to the Protestant Reformation.

What we do then is go to a church, a gathering, so that this person up front can repeat the same 10 things over and over , week after week, so that we can all feel like, **“We’ve got it. We’re in. We’re right! We believe the right things.”**

And if someone comes along and says something that’s not one of your 10 things, and you think “Wow, where did that come from. We’d better go around making sure

² <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-9-the-good-gift/>

everyone knows this guy is wrong... And so you get on your computer and start blogging about them.

And you can see how this becomes a problem, right? When the center of faith becomes a list, the fracturing will never end. Someone will always disagree with you. Once faith becomes about how we arrange the intellectual furniture in our heads, there will be another heretic, another witch hunt. The fracturing of the body will be endless. The dis-membering of the body will keep multiplying.

And as we think this month about why so many are leaving the church, and try to pay attention to why Church Matters, we need to stop here and realize:

This is part of why younger generations are leaving the church... and why some like the sound of spiritual but not religious, because when they think of religion, the church has taught them to think about a list. It's not the whole picture, but it's part of it.

They aren't interested in rigged lists, and infighting, and egocentric religion.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

***For centuries, the center of the Jesus story,
was not a list in our head.***

***For centuries upon centuries, the center of the Jesus story
was a table.***

A table where you gather around the bread and wine.

A table where everyone is welcome.

A table where you can bring everything that you have and don't have
you bring your mistakes, your sin, your brokenness, your regrets... you bring it
all,

Your joys, your gratitude, your hopes, your gifts.

You bring it all and gather around the bread and wine with other hungry people,
and together you are re-membering the Body of Christ.

When the table becomes center, then the center is a body, a person, a mystery...
the Divine Love flowing through all creation, even bread and cup, healing us, restoring
us... and flowing out of us to the world.

When the table is center, you begin to remember that God does not come to us
just in sermons and Bible study. God comes to us in food. Because more than teaching
us... God comes to feed us.³

Which is awfully good news. I don't know about you, but when I look out at the
world around me... and when I look deep within me... I see a whole lot of hunger.

We need this table.

The world needs this table.

Jesus knew we would...

³ Richard Rohr.

And so he took the bread and the cup, and said to them, “Take, Eat, Drink, This is my body and my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Prayer:

“O God as we come to this table now... we bring all of our hunger, body and soul to you... Come fill us with your life... with the mystery of your love poured out for the world... so that we might become your love to the world around us.

We ask these things in the name of the one who taught us to pray, saying,

“Our Father...