

Love God Love Others 3

“THE COMMUNITY’S TABLE” Matthew 26:26-29

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

--Matthew 26:26-29

What is it about food that marks a special occasion?

How do we celebrate Easter? We eat ham. How do we celebrate Thanksgiving? We eat turkey. How do we celebrate Christmas? We eat....everything!

What is it about food that marks a special occasion? *A meal is a multi-sensory experience that brings memories alive.* Think about it: You walk into Grandmother’s house on Thanksgiving Day. You smell the turkey in the oven. You see the table set with the good china. You see the people who are there – and you miss the people who aren’t. You feel the hugs, you feel the fancy tablecloth, you feel the special silverware in your hand.

You have certain rituals that go with the meal. Dad always carves the turkey. Mom always starts passing the food. Uncle Joe always reaches for the wine bottle. Aunt Betty always slaps his hand.

All these sights, sounds, smells and tastes bring memories alive and trigger all kinds of emotions. And a meal does that so much better than if I just said the words, “Be thankful.”

Well, in a few minutes, we’re going to have a meal. But first let’s think about where this meal comes from.

Quick review: Two weeks ago I told you that Jesus took an ancient Jewish creed called the *Sh’ma*, and he added to it to create what we now call The Jesus Creed – which is basically **Love God, Love Others**.

And then last week I told you that Jesus took an ancient Jewish prayer called the *Kaddish* and he added to it to create what we now call the Lord’s Prayer.

So he changed a creed, he changed a prayer – and now we’re going to talk about how he changed a meal.

LET’S PRAY: Father, we thank you for the food we are about to receive—both physical and spiritual. Speak to us about where this meal comes from, and what it means to us today. Amen.

It was hard, cruel labor. Sunup to sundown—seven days a week—backbreaking, exhausting toil—constantly under the threat of being lashed by a whip or run through by a spear—brutally oppressed by their Egyptian taskmasters.

God’s people Israel lived like this for 400 years, until finally God sends Moses to the King Pharaoh of Egypt to say, “Let my people go.” And the King says, “No, I’m not going to let your people go! I like my slaves!”

So God sends a series of plagues – boils, gnats, frogs, locusts, and other nasty things. And you need to understand that each one of these plagues was related to one of the Egyptians’ gods. For example, blotting out the sun attacked Ra, the sun god. Turning water into blood attacked the goddess of the Nile.

God is revealing himself to these people and saying, “Hello! I’m the real God! You should be worshipping me!”

And I truly believe that at any point in time, the Egyptians could have said, “We get it! We were wrong. You’re the real God. We’ve been worshipping false gods!”

And God would have forgiven them.

But instead, they keep worshipping idols. And they keep being prideful. And they keep oppressing God’s people.

And finally God says, “All right, I’m sending one final plague. The angel of death is going to move through the land of Egypt and take the life of every firstborn child.”

And God turns to his own people and says, “Listen: To protect YOU from the judgment that’s coming, I want you to do something. Go out to your flock and choose a perfect, unblemished lamb. Slaughter the lamb. Take the blood of the lamb and spread it on the doorpost of your house. Then, when the angel of death comes through, he will “pass over” you.”

And from here on out, God wants his people to remember this night--the night they were set free--the night they were delivered from slavery—*the night they were saved by the blood of the lamb.*

God wants them to never forget, so he tells them to mark the occasion with A MEAL.

The meal is called “Passover,” because it celebrates the night the angel of death **passed over** God’s people.

Now, fast forward 1,500 years (give or take). A young Jewish Rabbi gathers his students together to observe the Passover. Everything goes the way it always has. They eat the same food, follow the same rituals, just like they always have.

As the host of the meal, it’s the Rabbi’s job to bless the bread. So he holds it up and says, “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.” And then he breaks the bread, as the host has always done. But he does something very strange: As he passes the bread, he says, “*This is my body – broken for you.*”

The students are stunned. They’re thinking, “What is this?” But before they can recover, the Rabbi does it again. This time, he takes a cup of wine. He holds it up and says, “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.” And he passes it and says, “This is my blood – poured out for the forgiveness of sin.”

At this point, the students don’t know what to think. It’s definitely the strangest Passover they’ve ever attended.

What they will come to understand in the days ahead is that in saying, “This is my body,” and “This is my blood,” Jesus is instituting a new Passover. And he’s making himself the Passover Lamb. As the apostle Paul would say later, “*Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast ...*” (1 Corinthians 5:7b-8a).

Jesus makes himself the Passover lamb. And he makes the Passover meal into the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He took the Sh’ma and made it the Jesus Creed. He took the Kaddish and made it the Lord’s Prayer.

And now he takes this ancient Jewish meal in which the people remember how they were saved by the blood of a lamb, and he says, “I am the Lamb. Do this in remembrance of me.”

But there’s more—when we come to this table, we’re not just remembering. The Apostle Paul says, “*When we bless the cup at the Lord’s Table, aren’t we sharing in the blood of Christ? And when we break the bread, aren’t we sharing in the body of Christ?*” (1 Corinthians 10:16, New Living Translation). In some mystical, spiritual way that we can’t quite explain, we are going to be sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. The Greek word for sharing is *koinonia*. It means participation, close fellowship—communion. This is not just thinking about Jesus—it’s **fellowship** with Jesus.

And there’s more. Paul says, “And though we are many, we all eat from one loaf of bread, showing that we are one body” (1 Corinthians 10:17 NLT).

This meal is fellowship with each other. This table turns us into a community. Whatever else we are—black, white, Asian, Hispanic, northerner, southerner, Republican, Democrat, Carolina fan, Duke fan—whatever else we are, when we come to this table, we're all just hungry sinners. We're all just beggars at the table of grace. And that makes us all the same.

What is it about food that marks a special occasion? *A meal is a multi-sensory experience that brings memories alive.* In just a minute, you're going to see me lift up the bread and the cup. You're going to hear the music. You're going to feel yourself come forward. You're going to see your hands coming together in a gesture of receiving. You're going to hear the server say, "The body of Christ; the blood of Christ." You're going to touch the bread. You're going to taste the grape juice.

All these sights, sounds, smells and tastes bring memories alive and trigger all kinds of emotions.

It's communion with Jesus. It's community with each other.

It's our meal.

It's the Community's Table.