

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Six years ago, some friends and I went on a three-week self-guided tour of Russia. Instead of staying in hotels, we made arrangements ahead of time to stay with different families, and I am glad we did. We learned much more about the country that way than by doing the usual tourist thing. Most people lived in apartment buildings, they weren't fancy, but they were livable, and always kept neat and clean, but there was one thing that struck me about the floor plan of most apartments. The kitchens were ridiculously small, and there was no planned dining area. I never had the nerve to ask anyone why, but I had that question answered for me by one of our hosts. As she was lamenting her small kitchen she said, during Stalin's time when this was built, they purposely designed small kitchens because they felt that the kitchen and the family table was where most talk of insurrection and rebellion begins. Knowing that most Russians had little love for Stalin, I took her answer with a grain of salt until a guide on a museum tour told us the exact same thing. The premise, break up family table, and you break up the family is a threat to the government. This reminded me just how important something like dining together can be. It is where ideas are exchanged and intimate conversation takes place. It means something to be invited to someone's table, doesn't it? It says, "I trust you. I will speak openly with you. I want to spend time with you." Maundy Thursday – a time when Jesus invited the disciples to his table for Passover, and a night on which he invited believers from that time on to a special meal we call "Lord's Supper." It is a meal unlike any other. I would imagine that the person who watched it in church for the first time would have numerous questions: why are they leaving their seats and going to the front? What is that little wafer? Are they drinking alcohol? That smells like wine. Did the pastor just say we were eating someone's body and drinking their blood? What is this all about? Tonight, we explore the answers to those questions in detail. Listen now to Jesus' words recorded in I Corinthians 11:23-26. **For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,<sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."<sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."<sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

With these words, Jesus is inviting us to come to his table to eat. At first glance it might seem like a very no-frills event. The food doesn't seem all that impressive, a little sip of wine, and a dry piece of bread. We don't sit down to eat. We don't do any talking. It's done in a few minutes. And why are we doing it? Jesus gives us one answer when he says, **"do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."**

One reason we come to this meal is to remember. That's actually what Jesus and his disciples were doing even before Jesus introduced communion. They were celebrating the Passover, which was a remembrance meal. Almost 1,500 years prior, God had rescued the nation of Israel from Egypt. He sent Moses to Pharaoh with the message, "Let my people go." When Pharaoh refused, he would send a plague. Pharaoh would promise to release the people, but then when the plague was over, he would change his mind – this happened nine times. But the tenth plague was different. God told the Israelites to slaughter a lamb without any defects, roast it whole with bitter herbs, make bread without yeast, take the blood from the lamb and spread it on the doorframes of their houses. For those households who followed these instructions for the last plague, God's angel of death would pass over their homes and no one would die. For everyone else, their firstborn would die. After this plague Pharaoh let them go, and God commanded that every year afterwards, the Israelites would repeat this meal in remembrance of what God had done. This meal was a remembrance meal, but it was more than that. It also pointed ahead to Jesus. A lamb without blemish (without sin). Whoever looks to him and believes, for that person, God passes over their sin because Jesus, the perfect lamb, was sacrificed to pay for it. That was the meal the disciples were eating with Jesus when he spoke these words and instituted something new, the new meal we call communion, or Lord's Supper. Like the Passover, this is a remembrance meal. When we come to God's table, we remember that first Thursday night when Jesus invited his disciples to come. It was the night in which he was betrayed, the beginning of his final suffering and death. And when we eat his body which is in the bread, and drink his blood which is in the wine, we remember the specifics of that suffering. We remember the ripped flesh of his back as he was whipped. We remember the blood poured out of his head and hands, his feet and side. And as we prepare to come to that table, we make the connection between that suffering and our sins. That blood, that body, that was the price Jesus paid for lies to my parents, my teacher, my boss, or my spouse. That blood and that body, that's the price for my selfish attitude. That's the price for my pride and my compromising God's Word to look good in front of my peers. When we come to the Lord's table, we remember all of this, but like the Passover, the Lord's Supper is far more than a remembrance meal.

The Lord's Supper is a meal at which we receive God's gifts. Like every good meal, it provides us with the nourishment that we need – but in this case it isn't the physical nourishment that's important (not a lot of calories or

nutrition in that little wafer and sip of wine), but spiritual nourishment. Does that pass us by sometimes? Sometimes I wonder if we develop a mindset that the Lord's Supper is a kind of service that we do for God to keep him on our good side. We think to ourselves, "Well, I guess it's been a while since I went last, I'd better go to communion, that'll keep God happy, that will keep pastor happy. I've done my duty." But the truth is, we're not coming to the Lord's table to give him something. We're not going there to keep God or the pastor happy. We're going there to get something, to receive something.

At his table we receive the assurance of our forgiveness. Certainly, sins are forgiven even without the Lord's Supper. As children of God, we are swimming in a sea of forgiveness. And that's a good thing, otherwise we would be constantly worrying we might have a heart attack or car accident on the way to church and die without being forgiven. But we have doubts sometimes, don't we? That little voice inside asks, "Am I really forgiven?" "Can I really go to heaven without being punished for all the terrible things I've done?" "Is God really that merciful?" "What about that time when..."

Jesus knows we have these doubts, and so he takes the bread and the cup and says, "Look this is the very body and blood which paid for all your sins! You can see it! You can taste it! It's for real! You are forgiven!" It's that extra measure of assurance that we frail human beings need. And through that assurance, he really does strengthen faith. In my years pastoring, I've seen so often how that works. I most often observe it as I commune shut-ins. I can remember one particular woman a few years back whom I visit every other month and commune, and every time I'm about to leave, she would say, "Pastor, I always feel so much better after communion." She wasn't the only one – in the members back in Florida who ended up being my first three funerals – Helen Luther, Bill Phillips, and Lillian Weber – all said the same thing at least once, sometimes using the exact same words. "Oh pastor, I feel so much better after communion." Of course they do! God strengthened them with the nourishment from his table. Their sins were forgiven before I came, but that reassurance, that strengthening – what an awesome gift.

But there's still more. Forgiveness is the best gift, but it's not the only one. We also receive encouragement from each other at the Lord's table. Who comes to your house and eats with you? Isn't it usually family or close friends? We share that special meal with those who share a special bond with us, and it strengthens that bond.

When we come to the Lord's table, we show that we share a common bond, a bond of trust and an agreement with every person at that table with us: a common acknowledgement that we are all unworthy sinners, and at the same time, an acknowledgement that we all believe that the body and blood of Christ that purchased our forgiveness are present in those wafers and in that wine and are our guarantee of our forgiveness, and finally a trust that every word of the Bible, and only that word shows us how to stay on the narrow path to eternal life won for us by Christ. That's a bond that not many people share. We feel it when we're outside of these doors during the rest of the week and it seems everyone scoffs or laughs about those who still trust in the Bible and go to church. Isn't it a blessing to be able to come to a place where you can see others who believe the same as you, who can comfort you, and encourage you, who aren't afraid to confess their faith? Take a look to your left and to your right when you come up to the God's table tonight. It's OK! You can even smile! These are your brothers and your sisters! When you go to the kitchen table with your family, is it just an expression of your hunger or your relationship with the cook? No, it's also an expression of the closeness you share with your family. Enjoy the closeness you share with God's family!

When we come to the Lord's table, we remember his betrayal and his suffering, we receive the assurance of forgiveness and the encouragement of our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Finally, when we come to that table, it's a time to give thanks. And we show our thanksgiving, simply by coming and receiving. It's like when your grandmother calls and tells you to come for dinner and eat the special meal that she made for you. You stop what you are doing and come and eat (if your grandmother is as good a cook as mine). Simply that action would show her and others your gratitude and joy. To let that meal sit for three hours would be an insult. When we hurry to get to the dinner table, it tells her how much we love her cooking, and it shows others what a good cook she is.

When we come joyfully to the Lord's table, God says we "**proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**" There's an awful lot packed in that one little sentence. Basically, Jesus is telling us that when we come and receive his gifts, it's a way of proclaiming not only his death, but also his life. We don't eat and drink simply to remember the anniversary of his death. By our eating and drinking we cry to the Lord, "thank you for the sacrifice that you gave and for the forgiveness you won for me" and we cry out to those who watch us go to that table, "Jesus lives and he's coming back, and his body and blood have won for me eternal life!" Communion, Lord's Supper, is it a time to remember, yes, but it's far more than that – come! Remember, Receive, Rejoice! AMEN.