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Jesus, Take the Meal: Why We're Afraid of the Lord's Table
Luke 22:7-30

Thursday, August 23, 2007
Alumni Chapel, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

My eyelids were twitching with adrenaline. I was a little bit nauseous out of sheer excitement. I could see through the haze of cigarette smoke in the streets around me what was like the star of Bethlehem in front of me. Even though I was a grown man and a new dad, and even though I had a freshly minted Ph.D., I was jumping up and down clapping my hands like a game show contestant saying to my wife, “There it is. Let’s go. What if it’s not open? You are going too slowly.” As we hustled through the streets, what I saw were the Golden Arches; the corporate logo of McDonald’s. I don’t even like McDonald’s, but we had been in Russia for three weeks waiting for the adoption process of my two sons. And we had eaten gray sausage stuff, and borscht. And all the while, I was sitting there thinking, “There has got to be something to eat in this place other than this.”

At the same time, they warned us not to drink any water. And not only don’t drink water, don’t eat anything that looks wet. If it has any water on it at all, you will get sick. So I didn’t. I avoided anything that had liquid to it. I would cover my mouth in the shower to make sure no droplets came in and I would be sick. I was a stranger in a strange land, but there in that McDonald’s as we came up and saw the front of it and I turned around giggling like a schoolgirl, I could see Grimace. And sure enough, the fries were just the way they are here. The special sauce was just the way it is here. And even though I don’t like it, I was so joyful to see it that I just unhinged my jaw like a snake and consumed two Big Macs, two big things of fries, and realized I was doing so with such joy because I felt at home. Everything looked familiar. Everything tasted familiar. And I trusted the product here. I knew what this food was. It was home to me. I also realized that there was something within myself that I didn’t even recognize despite my cultural sensitivity and humble foreign policy. I was looking out that glass window standing with my Big Mac, looking at this empire formerly known as “evil,” thinking, “We won. Ronald Regan and Ronald McDonald have buried you.”

That was scary because I realized this was all because of food. And not even good food. The idolatries that were coming up in my heart, the trust that I had in this multinational corporate structure, it all had to do with what I was putting into my mouth and how I identified with it. And the Scripture tells us that food always does this. Luke writes to Theophilus here and tells him of the time of the Passover, something that every Israelite would have recognized. This is where Israel was to find its identity—in what they ate: bread without leaven. What they ate: bitter herbs mixed in with the meat. Something that was given to them through Moses for all

generations. They are always to eat this. They are always to celebrate in this way. They are always to remember in this way. They are always as they take this food in, to know what kind of God they serve.

And yet Luke tells Theophilus there is something different about this Passover. Something at this Passover completely changes. He begins with Jesus saying to his disciples, “I want to celebrate the Passover with you.” And he tells them where to go: “Go and say, let us set this up. You will find a man. You will speak to him and you will say, ‘Give us a room where we can celebrate Passover together.’” And Jesus, with this mysterious authority, is able to say that “The man will be there and the man will let you in. The man will provide for you everything that I have said.” And a pattern is set here. Luke tells us of Jesus gathering these disciples together, breaking bread, pouring out wine, and saying, “You are to continue to do this; and as often as you do it, you proclaim my death until I come.” Indeed, the Scripture tells us that when the Holy Spirit comes upon the early Christian community that the pattern was the preaching of the Word and the breaking of bread week by week. The Apostle Paul is writing to churches and telling them of the correct observance of the Supper together. Telling them of the way that the Supper is to define who they are, define the way they live together. And yet when you look at Luke and when you look at Acts and when you look at 1 Corinthians, and you compare it to the way that our churches view the Lord’s Supper and the way that we view the Lord’s Table, there is something quite different here.

So often we throw together the Lord’s Supper at the last moment. We spend all of our time explaining what it does not mean. And we are exactly right in what it does not mean. We are exactly right to warn people against a trust and a mysterious Sacramentalism. We are exactly right to say we reject Roman Catholicism and all forms of High Church notions of the Lord’s Table. And yet in so doing, we often forget to do exactly what Jesus is doing here, which is saying what this *does* mean and why this *is* significant and why this *is* important. Instead, we live out this dirge-like experience, usually once a quarter, almost like a funeral for someone we don’t quite know.

And yet Jesus says, “This is to be done in remembrance of me.” He says, “This is to be done as a proclamation of me,” and he shows us in this text, in all kinds of ways, exactly what it is we are remembering, exactly what it is we are proclaiming. When we lose this, we lose something crucially important about what it means to be the church, about what it means to be the people of God. What I would like for us to do this morning is to ask ourselves, is it just that we have forgotten the Lord’s Table or are we, like every generation of the church, scared of the Lord’s Table?

The Lord’s Table and the Proclamation of the Presence of Jesus.

Let’s notice first of all that Luke tells us here of the proclamation of the presence of Jesus. He begins this narrative with Jesus saying to the disciples, “I have desired to eat this Passover with you.” He makes a point of speaking of Jesus sitting at the table with his disciples and saying to them, “This is my body; this is my blood.” He tells us about Jesus repeatedly pointing them to the future, to *my* table: “You will sit down with me at my table.” Jesus is there with his disciples. He is eating with them: exactly what it means to have fellowship. There is a

reason why in the early church one of the great controversies had to do with Jews and Gentiles eating together with the eating of meat that is sacrificed to idols. When you are eating with someone, there is a communing together. There is a relationship. There is a fellowship there.

There is also the sense in which Jesus, when he tears the bread, when he hands the bread to his disciples, when he pours out the cup, when he feeds them, he is modeling exactly what God has always said that he does as Father: "Open your mouth and I will fill it," he says to the Israelites. "I will bring you into a land that is flowing with milk and honey." He is constantly speaking to the Israelites and saying to them, "Why don't you believe me when I tell you I will feed you? Why don't you believe me when I tell you I am with you? When I send you manna? When I send you quail? Don't you know that I am here? Don't you know I care for you? Don't you know that you who are evil, when your child comes to you, you do not give them a stone? I give you bread." Jesus sits there with his disciples reclining at the table. He takes the bread. He takes the wine. He gives it to them. And he, in so doing, is speaking about his presence with his disciples.

We are right to understand that Jesus is not mystically in the bread and wine. We are right to understand that there is not some rite or ritual that takes place at the Lord's Supper that transports us into another realm, as though suddenly Jesus is not there and now suddenly he is there. Instead, what we ought to see happening is exactly what Jesus is doing here with his disciples: he is pointing and showing them the reality of table fellowship. He has said to them already, "You don't celebrate when the bridegroom is absent; you celebrate when the bridegroom is present." And Jesus has promised and said to his church, "Wherever two or three are gathered together, there I am in your midst." Not just at the time of the Lord's Table. He is always with them in a head/body relationship. He is there at my table in my church. This is why when Paul speaks of the troubles going on with the Lord's Supper, and he says, "You ought to be able to discern the body and blood of the Lord," he is not speaking about the substance of the bread or the substance of the wine. He keeps turning them back to the issue of divisions within the church: "Why are there so many parties among you? Why is there so much bickering among you? Don't you know that Christ is not divided? Don't you know that you as the church are part of the unified body of the Lord Jesus Christ?" When you are gathered together in covenant with one another, Jesus is there in your very presence.

As our Abstract of Principles puts it, the founders of this institution, when they speak of the Lord's Supper, it is in no sense a sacrifice but it is designed to commemorate his death; to confirm the faith and other graces of Christians; to be a bond, a pledge; and a renewal of their communion with him, and of their church fellowship. What is happening in this upper room is Jesus is saying to his disciples, "I am here with you now." And he is saying to his disciples, "I will drink this again with you in the kingdom. I will eat this again with you at the kingdom. I will do so at my table." That's scary. When we gather together as churches and we understand that the hands around us tearing bread are the body of Jesus, when we recognize that those who are gathered with us, as Jesus says, "When you have done to the least of these my brothers, you have done to me," that we are seeing in this new temple, in this new household, the very presence of Jesus that Jesus is proclaiming through the gospel and proclaiming to us through baptism and proclaiming to us in the Lord's Supper. It means that there is a searchlight that comes upon us that does exactly the same thing as what happens here. Jesus turns and says as the one who

judges the living and the dead, a judgment that begins with the household of God, “One of you will betray me.” He turns and speaks a few minutes later to Peter—Peter, in all of his boldness and haughtiness—and says, “By this time tomorrow, you will betray me.” He speaks as one who is present not only in grace and not only in fellowship within the covenant community of the church, but he speaks as one who is present as Lord, as King, as Ruler.

We must stand up and proclaim in the Lord’s Table that what this means is that we are recognizing and celebrating that as the covenant community of God, Jesus is with us by his Spirit all of the time. And as we are eating of this bread and drinking of this fruit of the vine, we are proclaiming and announcing his presence with us. That is not always comforting. That is often scary. It is easier to reassure ourselves every time we come to the table, Jesus has left the building. But has he?

The Lord’s Table and the Proclamation of the Sacrifice of Christ.

Notice also that Luke tells us here that in the Lord’s Supper, there is a proclamation of the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus speaks of this as the Passover. He speaks of this as something that is taking off from and building upon and transforming it: this act of the Israelites as they gather together and celebrate the liberation of God through the substitution with blood. Jesus speaks and says, “This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood which is shed for you.” He speaks in terms of sacrifice. He speaks in terms of redemption for sin. He does so in a way that is shocking. He turns and says to Jews—Jews who would have memorized from the time they are very little that a Jewish man and a Jewish woman do not drink blood, do not eat that which has blood in it—and Jesus turns around and speaks of the wine saying, “This is the new covenant in my blood.” Then, he does something even more shocking. He turns and gives it to them and says, “Drink it,” in exactly the same way that he stood on the seashore and said, “Unless you eat my flesh and unless you drink my blood, you have no part with me.”

The Catholics are wrong to see that as communion bread and communion wine. As a matter of fact, you have an overly literalistic view there on the seashore: “How can we do this?” Yet Jesus sees this as a looking to Christ in faith. It is a looking to Christ in faith that is proclaimed not only with words but is proclaimed in the tearing of bread. It is proclaimed in the pouring out and the drinking of wine. What we are doing in the Lord’s Table is announcing to one another with the authority of Jesus himself, “I am a sinner. I ought to be in hell right now. And yet, the blood of Jesus washes away all sin.”

Jesus recognizes and sees something that is present even here in this very narrative: that the power of the evil one is not only the power to take an unbeliever and use that unbeliever to destroy, as with Judas. But the power of the evil one is also that of accusation: “Satan has asked for you, Peter, that he might sift you like wheat,” Jesus says. When we are gathered together as the people of God, gathered eating of bread that points to and signifies a body that was ripped to shreds for us. When we are drinking from a cup that represents and points to and signifies blood that was spurting out for us, we are proclaiming as Jesus says, his death. We are announcing. We are speaking. We are preaching the gospel to ourselves. We understand that when Paul says that the gospel is the power of God to salvation, this is not just something that is at the beginning of the Christian life. This is something that is throughout the Christian life; the

proclamation of the gospel is what builds us up in our faith. It's what points us continually to Christ. It's the reason why, when you have the celebration of the Lord's Table, when you have a congregation gathered together that all of the time is constantly being reminded: some of you in this room have paid for abortions; some of you in this room were what the world calls porn stars; some of you in this room were embezzlers and gamblers and wife abusers; some of you in this room were covetous, smug Southern Baptists; some of you in this room have violated the law of God in all of these many ways, but in Christ, the destroyer has passed over you. You are forgiven, not because God has turned in ignorance from you, but because God has placed your sins upon Jesus, and he has been through hell for you. This is a warning of judgment. It is also a magnificent proclamation of the liberating power of God. "You were slaves who were in Egypt," God says to the Israelites. In the Lord's Supper, as we proclaim the gospel to ourselves, we are announcing there: we deserve to be in hell right now. Which ought to humble us. Which ought to knock us down. Which ought to cause us to go out into our neighborhoods and around the world with the urgency of pleading with men and women and boys and girls: "Be reconciled to God," as though Christ were pleading through us.

But that's scary. We choose to make it antiseptic. We choose to make it ritualistic. We choose to try to make this as non-threatening as possible. Is there any wonder that our people are so amazed when they see Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. Is it any wonder that our people break down in tears when they see a visual representation of the tearing of skin and the spilling of blood, a visual representation that God has asked us to do week by week by week by week, not on film but in church. We're scared of that.

The Lord's Table and the Proclamation of the Kingdom of Christ.

But notice also that he speaks here of the Lord's Table as the proclamation of the kingdom of Christ. This is the Passover. The Passover did not just look backwards; the Passover also looked forward. So does this Lord's Table. Jesus speaks and says to them, "I will drink this again with you, I will eat this again with you, but I will do so in the kingdom of God." He speaks and says to them later on when they begin fighting and bickering, "I am going to sit at table with you so that you may eat and drink with me in my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." He speaks of this as a foretaste of the final banquet, a banquet that we see in the book of Revelation as a victory march, a victory banquet that is taking place. This is why the apostle Paul is able to write to the church in Corinth and say, "Your problem is that you are filling your own appetite rather than seeing that you need one another. You must love one another. You must seek to serve one another because in serving one another you are picturing and pointing to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus." When they start to fight, when they start to begin talking about who is greater and who is the one who is most important among them, Jesus points them to a table. He points them to a meal. He points them to a banquet. A time in which God does exactly what the psalmist says, prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies.

Jesus recognizes and sees that the temptation of the disciples is the same temptation that Satan brought to him and the same temptation that he will bring to us. The temptation is to find all of these serpents and scorpions and stones that the evil one promises and believe that it is bread. Jesus turns around and says, "You can have glory, you can have honor, you can have all

of these things.” Yet, if you are going to understand that these kingdoms are knocked aside in favor of a kingdom that is seated around a common table, then you understand that the kingdom of Jesus is not about narcissism. The kingdom of Jesus is not about self-glory. The kingdom of Jesus is not about importance. The kingdom of Jesus is a household. It is a family of brothers and sisters who eat together, and who long for the day when they will be seated together at the table. They are defined here by their food: not just what the food is but who is feeding them, who is giving it to them, who is promising it to them.

You and I are living in a world in which food represents and shows so much of the crises of identity all around us. We have childhood obesity all over in our churches: little boys and girls who are going to the cupboards by themselves and eating Twinkies because there is no one there. We have teenage girls starving themselves to death so they can look like the woman on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. We have middle age women who are making themselves vomit so that they can be as thin as they were in their wedding pictures, because they are afraid if they are not that their husbands will walk out. They are defining themselves around food, but they are defining themselves around a food that is poisonous.

Jesus turns and says, “If you see this countercultural kingdom, then what you are going to see is something that is completely different: a different kind of food, a food that is given in victory and celebration and joy. I will sit down with you and drink this with you in my kingdom. I will sit down with you when those come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at a party, at a celebration, at a wedding feast, at a marriage supper in which there is the clinking of knives and the raising of glasses, of a group of people who have been victorious over death, hell, Satan, and the grave.” He says, “Picture this and show this and as you do it, you proclaim my death.” But you proclaim my death how? “Until I come.”

Why is it that our Lord’s Supper services are so funereal? Why is it that even in churches that have had a very celebrating atmosphere, when it gets to that point, we roll out that table: it looks like a corpse covered in a white sheet. We stand up and believe that what we ought to do right now is to scrunch up our faces and feel sorry for Jesus. Jesus doesn’t want you to feel sorry for him. When Jesus says, “Proclaim my death,” that is a proclamation of victory. It is a proclamation of defeat. It is a proclamation that you are a child of God. And you are here at his table, at his victory party, so why in the world would we want to turn that into something that is somber and gray? Why in the world would we want to turn that into something that is so tame and so mild that we can control it?

We have hamster food-sized pellets of Styrofoam. We drink thimble-sized shot glasses of juice. We buy them in 500-unit boxes, uniform in their size. But is this what the carnal people of Corinth were fighting one another—risking the judgment of God—to knock people out of the way to get to? Or was this a meal? Was this a celebration? Was this a tearing of bread and a drinking of a cup that recognizes and sees that we have a common table because we are Christ’s? We don’t accept the outside categories of who is Lord, and who is master, and who is supervisor, and who is benefactor, and who is rich, and who is poor, and who is white, and who is black. We are seated at this table, recognizing that we are in Christ. And he feeds us. And we feed one another and serve one another. When we don’t see that reality, we will fall for someone else’s food. Peter forgot it immediately. The Israelites forgot it immediately after the Exodus. Why

would we want to turn to a joyless, meaningless Lord's Supper in which we say to one another, "We'll do this because Jesus tells us to do it, but we are not going to do that very often because then it will become commonplace." Do we do that with anything else? "John 3:16 is something we ought to bring out only at Easter." "Honey, I don't want to say I love you to you more than once a quarter or else it will seem meaningless to you."

We understand that when we come together at the Lord's Table, Jesus is preaching the gospel to us: a gospel that we need, a gospel that he has promised his church that, "Because I am with you all the time, because I am in your presence all the time, I am going to preach to you and speak to you in words of Scripture proclaimed from the pulpit, in the sloshing of water in the baptismal pool, and in bread and in wine."

Theological abstractions are safer than Jesus. Life principles are safer than Jesus. What is scary is to sit there, if you are Judas or if you are Peter, and look a man in the face who knows everything you think, and everything you've done, and everything you are. What if we were, in our own churches and in our own lives, to create a celebration around the table that would be similar to what is happening in that upper room, similar to what is happening in the book of Acts? So that when our children ask us, like the Bible says the children of the Israelites would ask, "Why do we observe this meal?", we would be able to say with tears in our eyes that, "We are not orphans. And Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so." What if when unbelievers saw what is going on in our Lord's Supper services, they would see a banquet worth going to? What if we created in our churches the kind of joyful proclamation through the eating and drinking together, so that people weren't trying to find that fellowship through Krispy Kreme donuts after Sunday school, but they were seeing it right there in the presence of the worship of the people of God? And what if, by recovering the Lord's Table, scary as it is, we created the kind of kingdom community, the kind of church in which our children and their theologian dads would look in puzzlement at multinational corporate clowns, lamp heated hamburgers and soggy fries as if to say, "I was at church last night, and you call *this* a Happy Meal?" What if?