



Nothing embodied dining more than holiday meals, especially Thanksgiving dinner. In the Allegheny Mountains, Thanksgiving marked more than the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. It ushered in the advent of deer season. With deer season came aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Our home brimmed with life for the weekend, but never more than it did in the dining room on Thanksgiving Day. The table brimmed with food, from choices of salads and relishes to the litany of pies to conclude the meal, leaving no reason to leave the table for

FINE DINING in a

The Lord's Supper invites us to pause at the table and remember God's saving grace.

Todd E. Johnson

Most of the year we walked through our dining room when I was growing up, but seldom used it.

We ate most of our meals in the kitchen, each person grabbing a breakfast bite to start the day before we were out the door. Lunches and snacks were often eaten standing rather than seated. Dinners in the kitchen were a bit more of a family event. Most lasted beyond the end of the meal as we discussed the day's events, shared jokes, or voiced concerns.

On the other hand, meals in our dining room were always memorable. We *ate* in the kitchen, we *dined* in the dining room. The dining room table was elegant wood surrounded with high-back chairs. When all the leaves were added, it could accommodate a sizable number of people, chairs backing up against the china cabinet and the serving bureau. Plates were fine china and the cutlery was silver. Dining room fare was delicious and plentiful—we feasted in the dining room even in lean times. Meals had many courses and conversations lingered long into the night.

hours. And who would have wanted to? My father and Uncle Mac told stories of their hunting adventures from years gone by, my cousins told stories of high school, military service, or introduced their new “special someone.” These were adventurous narratives from foreign lands to me, a non-hunting, elementary school student.

Though the experiences may have been unfamiliar, these tales were like old shoes. Year after year the story of my father introducing my aunt to my uncle was recited, along with other family tales. Retelling the story of our clan reminded us of the intimate bonds we shared and celebrated at the table. The boyfriends and girlfriends of our extended family learned our family's history, its life, loves and, of course, its laughter. The stories were of a family held together with steadfast love. We had much to give thanks for.

Jesus and Table Fellowship

Our world has become a fast-food world, people eating in haste and isolation, in our cars, at our desks, in silence. We live in a society now that dines infrequently. Dining often takes

place outside the home in restaurants. I have eaten with any number of people I don't know: from strangers at a lunch counter to anonymous eaters in the cafeteria.

But dining occurs with those with whom I am intimately connected. Dining becomes a context for intimacy, often with less people rather than more. Fine dining brings to mind romantic dinners for two. Dining does bring to mind community, but privacy more coupled than communal.

This is vastly different from the world of Jesus and the disciples. The

principles recognized him.

The table was the center of communal life in the first-century world, and this was no different for Christians. Religious meals had an additional level of importance for first-century people. There was a common understanding that food offered a deity put one in intimate fellowship with that deity, actually bringing people into fellowship with that god. So the idea that a meal offered in Jesus' name would bring you

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people to the same table was scandalous to the culture of the day—with Jews and Greeks, women and men, slaves and free sharing a meal as a sign of their unity. It was a prophetic statement often missed when considering the life of the earliest Christians.

As the Christian Church grew, the opportunity to eat a full meal together became less practical. Over time the meal faded away, and the meal's concluding blessing—sealed with eating a

Fast Food World

ins and outs of table fellowship defined social boundaries in their day. For a respectable Jew to eat with any Gentile, let alone a Samaritan or a tax collector, would have been unthinkable. Laws of ritual purity underscored the necessity of keeping one's diet and relationships kosher, something our Lord ignored. Of all the startling acts our Lord performed, indiscriminate table fellowship was possibly his most heinous offense. Jesus' willingness to eat with tax collectors and sinners, again and again, may have been the act that most quickly raised the ire of the devout faithful, and most likely hastened his execution. A meal was a sacred event, and to defile the rules of the table was to desecrate one's faith and one's community.

The Evolution of Christian Table Fellowship

It shouldn't surprise us then, that the defining act of fellowship for Jesus' followers was a meal. Jesus never ordered us to sing or preach in his memory, instead to eat with one another. It was during a meal combined with telling the family story of faith that Jesus dis-



into Jesus presence was not a Christian invention, but a cultural assumption the Christian Church inherited.

But the assumptions of the first century that separated people at the table according to race or class or gender were not assimilated by the Christian Church. The church welcomed to the table those who responded to the offer of salvation. To accept such a variety of

common loaf and drinking a common cup—remained as a remnant of what was once a dining experience. The meal shared by the church pointed back to our Lord and his radically inclusive table, and points ahead to the table in heaven where all who fellowship in

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Christ will gather celebrating the victory of the Lamb of God.

The importance placed upon the bread and cup in defining Christian worship and the Christian community cannot be overlooked, either then or now. The history of the table in the Christian Church is both fascinating and complex. It involves a shift away from the sacred act of dining together in Christ to the belief that the food itself—the bread and the cup—are sacred. It is an account of the stories told around the table being lost to those gathered around the table, and the meal becoming a performance to be watched, not food to be joyfully consumed.

Yet in the last century, much has been done to renew our understanding of table and its place in the church. Almost every church in the Western world has revised its celebration of the Lord's Supper in their worship books, and the Covenant is no exception. The new *Covenant Book of Worship*, along with the *Covenant Hymnal*, provides resources for the celebration of the table as the central act of our worship. These resources are opportunities to recount the great stories of the people of God and God's faithfulness to us all. They point to the presence of Christ in our midst of those gathered in unity at Christ's table.

Giving Thanks Today

The terms used to describe the table in Christian worship are "Lord's Supper," "Holy Communion," and the most common, "Eucharist," which means thanksgiving. A traditional prayer for the table, known as "The Great Thanksgiving" (*The Covenant Hymnal* #943) recounts the history of

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God's saving acts, and naming the presence of that salvation in Christ as the presence that draws us to the table and to one another. It is that balance of meal and story, word and sacrament, that is so crucial to the Christian faith retaining the spirit of the origin of the practice of worshiping God with food.

In a society where homes have media centers but not dining rooms, the celebration of the Lord's Supper can be quickly distorted and misunderstood. The bread and the cup is neither "eating" nor "snack." It is dining. Yet it too often is served as fast food in our churches. It is not a spiritual vitamin taken for one's benefit, but is a meal shared with one's family.

Kurt Miericke, superintendent of the Southeast Conference, invites people to share their prayer concerns and

joys at the conclusion of communion services by stating, "We are a family around a table, such conversation should come naturally." Unfortunately families are found less and less often around tables together, and even more seldom dining together.

As I reflect back on the joy of those meals around our dining room table, I am struck by the bond of love that was established among all who shared

that table, and remains to this day across all the miles and years apart. The preparation of the meal, and eating it was a small part of a greater whole bringing us together. I am also struck that the work of the new worship book is only the first step in creating our bonds of fellowship in worship. The new prayers and rites for the celebration of the table are delightful and welcome, and I pray they become familiar in their frequent use. But they fail to serve the purpose for which they are offered if

in the midst of the prayers we merely eat the bread and drink the cup as a private devotional act.

Instead I pray that our celebrations will reflect what we say they are: the joyful feast of the people of God. Might we fill our worship spaces with the stories of the people of God—old and new—echoing with laughter and tears and all else that goes with dining together as a family. Might every Covenant church feast together in celebration of our God's love made manifest in Christ our Lord. May the worship and fellowship we offer in Christ's name be a meal of both substance and celebration. And may these meals be memorable occasions of burning hearts, and eyes opened to the presence of Christ. To this end, let us give God thanks and praise. □