

October 7, 2012

**[World Communion: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California]
Jeremiah 22.13-17**

“Room for Us All”

Mark 14.17-25

It was a rambling two-story house, built for a large family many years before the present residents moved in with plenty of room in a large kitchen to prepare big meals. It echoed with the playful banter of people and the noisy clatter of dishes, pots and pans as they went about preparing food. The folks gathered around a large table with many chairs in the dining room. They never knew how many people would be there—unanticipated friends invited by one or more of the kids or who just dropped by. There was the invariable joy of unexpected guests—everyone was welcome and there was always plenty of food. Meals were not hurried. No one was in a rush. Conversation was interesting and relaxed. Speakers weren't interrupted; people actually listened. It was evidently something they had learned to do over the years. When dinner was finished no one got up but the conversation continued as darkness began to fall. Then at last and reluctantly, they rose to clear the table, put away the leftover food and wash the dishes.

Perhaps we all recall family meals so unwilling to break up! But don't some of the best times we remember with family and friends take place around a table? Birthdays and anniversaries, holidays and other celebrations, those special times for connecting with those we love. That community of family and friends around a big table in a large house is a pretty good image of the church. Add to it not only the special celebrations but the simple meals we share in our homes. It's an image easy to associate with Jesus.

When reading the gospels we could get the impression that Jesus was often the “unexpected guest” in a variety of homes. There were Mary, Martha and Lazarus who provided him a “base” of hospitality—a place to eat, rest and lay his head. There were the “Hey, Zacchaeus!” moments when Jesus declared, “I'm eating at your place this evening.” There were the two disciples, we remember, who on the

road to Emmaus were joined by a stranger. The three stopped for a meal and as they talked and sat down to eat, their “guest” assumed the role of host. As he blessed and broke the bread they recognized the risen Christ.

Sharing a meal isn't an uncommon thing. It's pretty much part of the expected hospitality of the day. It's Jesus' intention, rather than a coincidence, that he so often deals with people over food. Sharing food is what we do with those we welcome into our homes and lives. It's not just taking the energy in to fuel our bodies, but a time for community—a meeting of hearts and minds. The late Henri Nouwen observed in his book, *With Burning Hearts*, that when Jesus enters the home of his disciples it becomes his home. When he's invited to a meal the guest becomes the host. When it's time to eat he says the blessing, breaks the bread and hands it to them. So simple, so ordinary, so obvious yet still so very different! What else can we do when sharing food with family and friends but bless it, break it and pass it around?

The table is an inviting symbol of hospitality. “Dinner's ready. Come, gather 'round,” we say in welcome, “there's plenty of room.” And “Here, have some more.” “There's just a little left, eat it up!” Jesus reminds us that we don't live by bread alone. But we don't live without bread either. We ought never to sit at table or come to this holy table without reminding ourselves of the need to invite the hungry of the world to a table of genuine food.

Unfortunately there are times when we put up walls instead of tables—walls of fear, walls of exclusion, walls to keep the world—and more importantly people—out. It's hard for many of us to believe today that in its recent history the church actually walled people out not only from the Lord's Supper but from the church and worship itself. People who had been baptized but with a different color skin or language, social status or gender preference—though we haven't completely won

the battle here as yet—were kept out. They had to build their own churches ‘cause they weren’t welcome in “our” congregations. In some places they were welcome only in the balcony; in others just the last few pews were reserved for them. In both cases they were required to wait until “we” took communion before they could also receive the sacrament that is to symbolize our unity in Christ.

One small church in the pre-Civil Rights south divided the sanctuary into right and left—blacks on the right, whites on the left. That was progressive for the times but there was a special irony in the arrangement. Evidently they had forgotten that in the scene of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25 those on the right side—the blacks in this case—Jesus welcomes into God’s realm; and those on the left, the goats of the story, are condemned. Nor did they heed the words of St. Paul in Ephesians (2.19-22), “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but . . . fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God . . . Through Christ the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord. In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place of God in the spirit.”

In the lesson from Jeremiah we have a few words that could apply to us, to the church, and especially to communion even though the prophet was unaware of how well his words would speak to later ages and to Christians who gather around Christ’s table. God speaks to the king through Jeremiah and thus to the nation of Israel, “Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and the needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? says the Lord.”

We can apply this to our meals. We gain strength from the table—from the food and from each other. But strength to do what? To do good not evil. To work well not poorly. To treat our neighbor right not meanly. To enjoy life and

help one another. To build community and overcome alienation. “‘Is this not to know me,’ says the Lord.” If this is true of our meals, how much more so of communion where we affirm our unity in the Body of Christ?

We aren't without blame, those of us who call ourselves the church. We've built our share of walls in our time. Thank God we've torn a lot of them down but still too many remain and some never seem to be torn down. Every time we claim we have a corner on the truth, that no one is right but us, we put a brick on the wall. Every time we assume superiority over others, patronize or exclude them, “all in all, we just put another brick in the wall.”

Ruth Duck, a poet and hymn writer, puts it this way:

“Walls mark our bound'ries and keep us apart; / Walls keep the world from our eyes and our heart. / Tables are round, making room for one more, / Welcoming friends we'd not known before. // Walls make us sure who's in and who's out; / Walls keep us safe from all question and doubt, / But at a table in open exchange / New ties are formed as our lives rearrange. // So build us a table and tear down the wall! Christ is our host. There is room for us all.”*

The gospel lesson today tells of a very special meal Jesus shares with his disciples in celebration of the Jewish Passover. But in the Christian context it becomes far more than that. Once again Jesus is the host, taking the bread and wine, the common things on the table and lifting them into a new dimension as signs and symbols of himself—an action that becomes the archetype of the central act of Christian worship for the church in almost all of its many expressions. As symbols of himself, by extension, the elements are also signs of the new dimension of human unity and world community Christ ushers in.

Communion is where we find the most intense sense of the presence of God in our lives and the encouragement to live a life of faith. We come hungering for

spiritual sustenance. We meet Christ at the table, at this table, where he is the host. Here we are given the bread, his body. His body now becomes the church, his body, and we are its members. Life in Jesus makes the presence of God our spiritual sustenance in all times and all places, at any time in any place. In other words, the presence of God becomes our spiritual food and drink.

United in Christ we go forth together to continue his work in the world. Our common life in Jesus fosters a desire to emulate him—to reach out to others, to join in building God’s realm. In Jesus we diminish the old distinctions between happiness and sadness, success and failure, praise and blame because he lifts us into a new dimension of existence. In all aspects of life Christ lives in us and we in him. We no longer belong to a world that keeps dividing and separating, judging or building walls.

In communion, Jesus builds community. Because he lives in us we’re able to recognize Christ in our fellow human beings, to welcome him by welcoming them to the table, a table where there is always love, always acceptance, always community, and always room for one, a dozen, several score, or many, many, many more . . .

The closing verse of Ruth Duck’s poem tells us about becoming one in Christ. She writes: “Once we were strangers, divided, alone, / Hate and distrust built a wall stone by stone. / Now at a table the bread we share / Joins us to Christ in a circle of care. // So build us a table and tear down the wall! / Christ is our host. There is room for us all.”*

AMEN!

*Ruth Duck, “Walls Mark Our Bound’ries,” in *Circles of Care: Hymns and Songs* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998).