Sunday, August 19, 1990
A GATHERING AROUND THE TABLE
Acts 2:42-47

Within the Christian community and throughout its history, beginning with the early church, there has probably been more controversy and argument about “The Table” and the meaning of Holy Communion, which the table symbolizes, than almost anything else.

One point of conflict almost from the beginning, and which is still with us, is: Who is welcome at the Lord’s Table to participate in Holy Communion, to receive the elements? Does an individual have to be a member of a Christian church of some kind to receive communion? Does an individual need to be baptized? Is it for members only? And what constitutes membership? In some denominations in our Christian family, one cannot receive Holy Communion unless that one is also a member in good standing in a congregation of that particular denomination. Members in good standing of other denominations are not welcome at the table.

Another conflict about “The Table” has been where to locate it in the worship space. Was the table to be placed on the main floor of the church and not elevated in any way? Many argued — keep it on the floor with the people — after all, it belongs to the people of God and not to the clergy or any one group in the church.

Others said, “Bring it up to the platform. After all, if we hold it to be so central and so important to our worship, let it be elevated so we can all see it.” Others said, “No, that makes it too much like an altar and not a table.”

Now if these arguments seem trivial, in the deepest sense they are not. Many churches today insist that whether it is elevated or on the floor, it must be away from the wall so that people can get behind it, which means it is a table and not an altar. It is not an unimportant discussion.

We know from Luke’s description of the early church in the Book of Acts, that when followers of Jesus gathered together each week, they gathered around the table and broke bread together. It was central in the life of the early church. To eat together brought to them the memory of Jesus, who was, says Luke, “made known to them in the breaking of bread.” It brought to them the memory of Jesus, who was so frequently found “at table.” How many times in Luke’s writing we are told that Jesus was “at table.” He was “at table” when a woman anointed him. He was “at table” when he noticed people were pushing and shoving to get the head places. He was “at table” when he noticed that the people at dinner were the same ones who were at the last dinner and they simply invited each other over and over again. And Jesus wondered why they never invited anyone off the streets — anyone different and new to them. They can’t have you over, can’t return the invitation, but God can have you over. He was “at table” when he was most often criticized for eating with sinners, outcasts, and other undesirable people. He was “at table” when he gave the great commission. This being at the table reminded the early church of the frequent posture of Jesus eating with people.

The most biting criticisms of Jesus were about his eating habits. They said he would eat with anybody. He was called a glutton and a winebibber. And the criticism of him was correct. He ate with everybody.

He ate with the rich like Zaccheus. He ate with the religious like Simon. He ate with the publicans and the sinners. He ate with the poor, the lame, and the blind. He ate with the political and the non-political. He ate with the active and the inactive. He ate with the righteous and the sinners. He ate with everybody. Because in eating together, he was expressing his full acceptance of another person. In that culture, to sit at the table and break bread and part of it goes in that other person's mouth and part of it goes in your mouth, in the act of eating together, you have said, we are equal. I accept you fully as a human being.

And so the early church, according to the Book of Acts, continued the practice of Jesus — they ate together. It was important in their life. It was the way they did charity work without being put down. They ate together by bringing the food together. And you couldn't tell when they were eating together who brought more than enough food and who could afford to bring very little food or none at all. Nobody was put down. Nobody was embarrassed.

It wasn't a case of those who had brought food eating here and those who had not brought food waiting. They ate together. This is why the Apostle Paul, when he wrote to the church in Corinth, was angry and upset with what that church was doing in their eating together. Because what happened in that church was that the people who brought the food didn't wait for the servant class, the people who had to work late, the slaves who were members of the church — they didn't wait for them. They went ahead and ate. And then those who had to work late, coming in for that evening meal, had the leftovers. And Paul said, "Listen, if you are that hungry, eat before you come." This is a fellowship meal. This is the Lord's Supper. You wait for each other, and you pass things to each other. One of the true marks of the church is that it is one place I can go and never have my feelings hurt.

Fred Craddock tells a story about when he was in the third grade, and the government had just started a hot lunch program in the elementary school he attended. He had established his credentials as being poor, so he was entitled to a free hot lunch. The teacher, not meaning any harm, announced, "When the bell rings at five to twelve, all the children getting a free lunch will march to the lunchroom. At ten minutes after twelve, when the bell rings again, all those who are paying for their lunch will go to the cafeteria." Fred said that when the bell rang at five to twelve, some stood up and went to the cafeteria, but he remained in his seat. He was hungry, very hungry, but never went to lunch. He said if there's one thing worse than being hungry, it's being asked to march out in front of your friends who are paying for their lunch.

Here's a little bit of advice for all of us to remember: When you do something for someone, lay it very gently, very gently against their pride because with some people that's all they have left.

This table we gather around for the Lord's Supper is important. And I believe that all people who want to come are welcome to it. It is God's table and not ours. God's invitation is all-inclusive. Recently, I was reading an interview with M. Scott Peck, and he was telling about his becoming a Christian. Among other things, he said, "One reason I remain non-denominational is I don't understand how one group of Christians can deny the Lord's Supper to another group or how we can keep anyone who wants to come away from the table." He went on to say, "I fell in with this fast group of nuns three or four years before I was baptized, and they accepted me into their community and allowed me to take communion with them. I celebrated the Lord's Supper quite intensively before I became baptized. To deny the Lord's Supper to somebody who's not baptized is like demanding that someone be able to play a good game of tennis before you let them on the tennis court."

A little bit of history of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion and the table we gather around will be helpful here. According to the New Testament, Jesus gathered with his disciples for one last time before his trial and crucifixion, and they had a meal together where the bread was broken and wine poured. After the Easter experience, the followers of Jesus gathered regularly, at least once a week, and had a meal together and remembered Jesus. It was a simple meal, a kind of potluck dinner where bread was broken and wine poured as they gathered around the table and served each other.

Then sometime over a period of several hundred years, the table was turned into an altar; it was pushed back against the wall. A fence was built around the chancel, and only the clergy could touch the bread and wine and give the elements to those who gathered in church, and they had to come forward in front of everyone to receive communion. Those who could not walk or stand were left out. Other restrictions were set up. Were you truly worthy? Had you gone to confession?

One of the big changes the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century brought about was to return the Lord's Supper to the people. The altar once again became a table. It was a big day of rejoicing when Zwingli, one of the leaders of the Reformation, had the people bring the bread and wine to the pews so that the elements of communion could be passed from person to person so that each one was a minister to the other.

Then no one could exclude you from the Lord's Table. This remains today a very critical matter. This table has been important from the beginning for Christians, not only to help us remember the accepting love of God as revealed in Jesus but also to help us continue to express that accepting love in the life of the church. This remains today a very critical matter — who does the church eat with? With whom do Christians eat?

It's still a good question. We eat with ourselves. We eat with each other. That's very important, of course.

However, the Bible says that we in the church are to practice hospitality, and that literally means to welcome and love the stranger. Hospitality means extending the table to the stranger.

So this morning we in this congregation invite you, no matter who you are, to come to the Lord's Table. All are welcome. Come and meet Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Amen.