Sunday, August 14, 1994
TABLE TALK
Acts 2:42-47

Within the Christian community and throughout its history, beginning with the early church, there has been considerable controversy and argument about “the table” and the meaning of Holy Communion, which “the table” symbolizes.

One point of conflict, almost from the beginning and still with us today, is: Who is welcome at the Lord’s Table to participate in Holy Communion, to receive the bread and wine? Who is worthy enough to receive the “bread of life?”

Does an individual have to be a member of a Christian church to receive communion? Is it for members only? Does a person have to be baptized? What constitutes church membership?

In some denominations within our Christian family, one cannot receive Holy Communion unless they are also a member in good standing in a congregation of that denomination. Members in good standing of other Christian denominations are not welcome at the table.

Another conflict about “the table” has been where to locate it in the worship area. Should the table 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 into the chancel. After all, if we hold it to be so central and so important in our worship, let it be elevated so we can all see it. Still, others said — no, that makes it too much like an altar and not a table. Some claimed that whether the table is elevated or on the floor, it must be away from the wall, free-standing, so that people can get behind it, reminding us that it is a table and not an altar.

There have been similar arguments in churches concerning the location and height of the pulpit. Most of our early Congregational Churches were “pulpit-centered” in design. The pulpit was located in the center and elevated, directly behind the communion table. This symbolizes the centrality of the preaching of the Word and the sacrament of Holy Communion. Both are of equal importance.

As far as the early church as described in the New Testament is concerned, we know that when the followers of Jesus, known as “followers of the way,” gathered together each Sunday for worship, they gathered around the table to hear the Word of God and to break bread together. It was central in the life of the early church. Here’s how Luke describes the activity of the church in one sentence in the book of Acts: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

Table talk and eating together brought to them the memory of Jesus, who was, as Luke writes in another place, “made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

It brought to them the memory of Jesus, who was so frequently found “at table” in his ministry and who used a food metaphor to describe himself as “the bread of life,” and the metaphor for God’s kingdom as being like a “huge banquet” or “dinner party.”

In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus was “at table” when a woman anointed him. He was “at table” when he noticed people pushing and shoving to get seated in the prominent places, and he reminded them that in God’s banquet, “those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last.” He was “at table” when he noticed that the people at the dinner party were the same ones who were at the last dinner party at someone else’s house, and they simply invited the same people over and over again. And Jesus wondered out loud why they never invited anyone off the streets — anyone different and new to them?

He reminded them that even though they felt they could not invite outsiders or strangers or people different from them, God does. God welcomes everyone to God’s banquet table.

Remember too that Jesus was most often criticized for eating with sinners, with outcasts, and other undesirable 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 was true. He ate with anyone and everybody, even the nobodies.

He ate with rich people like Zacchaeus. He ate with religious people like Simon. He ate with publicans and 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 was at table with all people because, in eating with them, he was expressing his full acceptance of them and, by example, God’s acceptance. In that culture, and still today in many cultures, to sit at table and break bread with someone is to say, “I accept you as an equal.”

And so the early church, according to the New Testament, continued the practice of Jesus — they ate together, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, women and men and children. It was also the way they did charity work without putting others down. They ate together by bringing food, 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 brought food, eat here, and those who could not afford to bring food, wait.” They ate together.

Sometimes, though, they forgot the example of Jesus. This is why the Apostle Paul, when he wrote to the church at Corinth, was angry and upset with some of the bad habits that congregation had fallen into in their eating together. What happened was that the people who brought the food didn’t wait for the servant class, the people who had to work late, the slaves and other less fortunate people 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 the evening meal, had leftovers.

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. You serve each other. One of the true marks of the church is that it is one place a person can go and not be made to feel inferior.”

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. And then he said, "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 very important. And I believe that all are invited. You are welcome. 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 talking about 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 to the table away from the table."

He went on to say, "I fell in with this wonderful 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 intentionally before I became baptized. To deny the Lord's Supper to somebody who's not baptized or who may not be a member of your particular church or who does not seem worthy 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 about 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 arrest, trial, and crucifixion, and they had a meal together where the bread was broken, and wine was 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 was 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 the wine and give the elements to those who came to the church, and they had to come forward 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 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, and in that way, each one was a minister to the other.

In that way, no one could exclude you from the Lord's Table. This remains today a very critical matter because 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 and live out that accepting love in our relationships with one another. This remains today a very important matter. Who is welcome at the Lord's Table? Who is welcome at the tables in our homes? As followers of Jesus, can we refuse anyone access to the Lord's Table?

Jesus called himself the "bread of life." This bread of life is for everyone. The Bible says that we in the church are to practice hospitality, and that literally means to reach out and to welcome and love the stranger. Hospitality means extending our table to the stranger.

So today, we in this congregation invite you, no matter who you are, to come to the Lord's Table. Come and meet Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Come to the table and experience the forgiving love of God. Amen.