Sunday, October 2, 2005
NO RESERVATION NECESSARY
Acts 2:42-47

A friend told me about an announcement she saw in a church newsletter. It stated that next weekend the church would celebrate the Lord's Supper. My friend had no church background and was not a member of any congregation. She said to me, "I have four questions about this Lord's Supper announcement. What is the Lord's Supper? Am I invited? How much will it cost? Do I need a reservation?"

I told her that all four questions were valid ones. The answers, however, would vary depending on which Christian denomination that congregation represented. I went on to tell her that she was not invited to the Lord's Supper in some churches unless she was a member of that congregation in good standing. She would not have to pay for the supper directly, but the church officials might want to be sure that she was up to date on her church pledge and that she had the right beliefs. I also told her that I was not sure whether or not she would need a reservation, but there are congregations that require that you attend a "service of preparation" in order to participate in the Lord's Supper. In that way, you make your reservation.

On the other hand, I told her there were church congregations — and First-Plymouth Church is one of them — where she was always invited, no reservation was necessary, she would not be questioned about her beliefs, and there would be no charge for the supper. All she had to do was show up.

Then my friend repeated her first question. She wanted to know the history of what the church calls "The Lord's Supper" or "Holy Communion." How did it get started? What does it mean? Why has it continued? I told her that there are varying traditions concerning its origin, practice, and meaning.

One tradition about the Lord's Supper claims that Jesus was an early follower of John the Baptist. After some time, however, he went his own way and gathered a group of disciples and followers. A major difference between John the Baptist and Jesus had developed. The main difference was that John the Baptist emphasized that you needed to be baptized, and in so doing, you gained a unique access to God's Holy Spirit in your life.

Jesus didn't discourage baptism, but he added to it. He taught that God's Spirit, with all of its energizing love and power, could continue to be experienced and known best in eating together, which included being part of a beloved and caring community. Whereas baptism was a one-time event, eating together took place regularly. Therefore, Jesus became well known for his fellowship meals. As one Bible scholar described his ministry, "He ate and drank his way through Galilee." His critics called him a "glutton and a wine-bibber." That's also why, in many of his teachings and parables, he described the realm and presence of God in this life and the life to come as a huge banquet, a big party with people of all sorts — the privileged and the underprivileged, Jews and Gentiles, people from every country, with every color of skin, sinners and outcasts — all eating together in a joyful celebration. Everyone is invited. No reservations are necessary.

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, another tradition concerning the Lord's Supper came into use. The disciples of Jesus also remembered that on his last evening before his trial and crucifixion, he was the host at a final supper with them. During the meal, he took bread,

blessed it, and gave it to them so that they would remember that he was the “bread of life.” He also took the cup and gave it to them so that every time in the future when they ate and drank together, they would experience his Spirit among them. As one gospel writer described it, “He was made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

As the early church grew, both traditions — and maybe one or two more — were continued as followers of Jesus gathered to eat together. That’s what the story read today from the Book of Acts in the New Testament tells you. In reading the Bible, there are times when some of the most revolutionary statements are hardly noticed because, to you, the reader, they seem so ordinary.

Pay attention again to the first verse of the scripture reading for today and see if you can hear the most startling sentence. In these verses, Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts and also the gospel according to Luke, is describing the activity of the early followers of Jesus. “They [that is, the participants in the early congregations following the death and resurrection of Jesus] devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.”

The key phrase here is “the breaking of bread,” in other words, eating together. A few verses later, Luke writes, “Day by day ... they broke bread in their homes and partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.”

They were continuing what Jesus had done with them over and over again, before and including his last meal with them. As I mentioned earlier, the most shocking part of his eating and drinking during his public ministry was that he did so with all kinds of people: sinners, Samaritans, women, and others considered to be outcasts or not worthy.

So it is not surprising that after his death and resurrection, his disciples and others, now called “followers of the way,” continued eating together and in so doing remembered him and experienced his presence among them as the empowering energy of God.

Although these meals in the congregations of the first century may have incorporated some of what we have come to associate with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, or what we call Holy Communion, they were also common meals. What you have here in the book of Acts is the record of the first church potluck dinners. You bring a salad. I’ll bring a casserole. And someone else will bring dessert.

They ate together. It sounds so simple and common that you pass over the words and miss their shocking implications. It was revolutionary because, in those days, among people who were not followers of the way, it was unheard of. Those early congregations had in them all kinds of people. There were slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, women and men, poor and rich. What they had in common was that they were followers of the way of Jesus. They knew they were sisters and brothers with God as their Creator. They knew they were all created in God’s image, and they demonstrated this by eating together.

They ate together. It was subversive and counter-cultural because, in that time, Jews and Gentiles were enemies. They would have nothing to do with each other. Not only did they live in separate neighborhoods (it’s all right and easier to love your neighbors if you choose them carefully), they wouldn’t walk on the same side of the street. The division between Jews and Gentiles was so severe in many places that if a Gentile happened to wander into a Jewish household while a meal was being served, the food would have to be thrown out because it

would then have been considered unclean. Jews considered it a crime to aid a Gentile woman in childbirth because to do so was to help bring another Gentile into the world.

The division between Jews and Gentiles of that day was even more severe than that between Jews and Palestinians in our time, or between Blacks and whites in our own country when segregation was the rule of the day.

So when Luke says that followers of the way of Jesus ate together, he is reporting a radical activity. Even today, eating together, almost more than anything else you do, symbolizes that you are members of one human family.

It is no accident that during the civil rights demonstrations in the late 1950s and early 1960s, lunch counters and restaurants which said that Black people and white people could not eat at the same counters or tables, or drink from the same water fountains, were the first targets for "sit-ins." Remember that old movie, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? It was about people of different races eating together.

In the early church, what did it take for such bitter, sworn enemies to put aside age-old animosities and traditions to eat together? Something remarkable must have happened because heretofore they would never have sat down at the table together. Now they were eating at the same table with glad and generous hearts. What happened? The answer is, Jesus happened. In the first letter of John in the New Testament, the author reports how Jesus can change your way of living. He wrote: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another."

A minister colleague of mine told me about a terrible fight that took place in the congregation he was serving. Two factions were at each other's throats in a congregational meeting. Finally, someone who was not a part of either faction stood up in the meeting, looked at both groups in the dispute, and said, "If we can stand both of you, we think you should be able to stand one another."

That's what followers of the way are asked to do. Through Jesus, God is saying to you and me, "If I can accept you, seeing as I do more flaws in all of you than you can imagine, then shouldn't you be able to accept one another?"

From our point of view, we always tend to put people into categories. There are friends and enemies, people on the inside and on the outside, people you consider to be similar to you, and people you think are too different from you, and therefore you want to have as little to do with them as possible. In order to solve this problem, St. Paul said to the quarreling Corinthians, "From now on we regard no one from a human point of view."

Paul is reminding you that as followers of the way, you take your cue not from your own feelings and judgments, because they are frequently limited and imperfect and ultimately don't matter. What matters for a follower of the way is to see others as Jesus did, the same Jesus who invited Samaritans, tax collectors, and other outcasts to eat with him.

An ancient Christian teacher defined the kingdom of God in this way: "The kingdom of God is simply seeing things from Jesus' point of view." So for the members of the early church to sit down and eat together means nothing less than they had learned to trust Jesus' point of view more than their own. They ate together. No reservations necessary. What a sign and wonder that is.

We need more signs and wonders like that in our day, not only in the church but in society at large. We separate people in so many artificial ways. He's Black. She's white. I'm heterosexual. She's homosexual. He's tall. She's short. I'm a German-American. She's African American. Jesus never suggested you deny your ancestry, your ethnic background, your religious heritage, or your gender, but he knew you can go too far in that direction and make that the most important thing about you or the only thing about you.

I believe that through Jesus, God calls you to honor and celebrate your uniqueness and diversity and, at the same time, move beyond it to a higher unity. It finally comes down to this — what is the most important fact about you? According to Jesus, the most important fact about you is that you are a child of God, created in God's image, and you are all members of one family.

To put it another way, you come from the love of God. Your life is completely surrounded by God. When you die, all the labels you had attached to you and those which you applied to others, are meaningless. You will find in the life after this life that when you are at God's table, there will be all kinds of people there — people you had never imagined that you would have as dinner partners, maybe even people you would never have thought of inviting to sit at your table in your home.

You don't need to wait for the life after this life to eat at the Lord's table with all kinds of people. On this World Wide Communion weekend, you are symbolically eating together with people from all over the world. It is Jesus who invites you to this table, and no reservations are necessary. Amen.