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Exodus 12: 1 – 4, (5 – 10), 11 – 14
 1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 26

Ps. 116: 1, 10 – 17
 John 13: 1 – 17, 31b – 35

Who here cannot remember a special occasion celebrated with a special meal? Perhaps a birthday party growing up? A wedding reception? A wake or reception after a funeral? A graduation party? A reunion? A 50th anniversary? Sunday dinner with the family? A meal on a trip? A Thanksgiving turkey? An Easter ham?

Food in the form of a special meal is how we celebrate, commiserate, contemplate, carbonate and consecrate life. These meals are at the heart of so many of the most meaningful times of our lives. It is perhaps a deeply human instinct to come together over a meal and mark significant moments. Sharing a meal binds us together in a way that little else can. These special meals speak volumes about *who* is important to us, *what* is important to us, and what our hopes and joys and dreams are. They remind us of the past and yet, as they fortify us in body, mind and spirit, they also point to the future. Meals can be an outward and spiritual sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Tonight, of course, is Maundy Thursday, so named for Jesus' commandment that we love one another. We are to love each other as Jesus has first loved us. Jesus chooses the occasion of his last meal together with his disciples to show them (and us) the depth of that love. A love so deep that it is willing to sacrifice itself for the well-being, the shalom, of the other. Knowing that time is very short, Jesus is graphic. As he lifts the loaf of bread off the table, he breaks it wide open, scattering pieces of the thick, hard crust across the table. This is my body, broken for you, he says. As he picks up the cup of blood-red wine, he says, "Remember how the psalmist wrote, 'I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord?' Well, this is my blood, shed for you. It will *be* your cup of salvation. Whenever you come together at table, remember me, knowing that I will be with you."

This is merely one, albeit an important one, in a long chain of meals that Jesus shares with his friends and followers – and some of his detractors – during his ministry. He has chosen as the occasion the Passover – a meal imbued with a powerful meaning all its own. The Passover is about salvation from God through liberation from bondage and oppression. It is about the blood of a perfect and perfectly innocent lamb that saves the people of God. It is about identity – about who and what are important – and about looking toward the future.

Jesus uses this meal to say to his disciples what is uppermost in his heart and mind. Through his actions, perhaps more than his words, Jesus tells his closest friends and followers not only what is going to happen to him the next day, but what it means. Jesus takes the familiar elements of Passover, the bread and the wine. But, instead of using them as a reminder of the Exodus, or pointing forward to the final liberation of Israel, he uses them to point to himself and how he is to die. Although the disciples don't truly grasp the meaning of it at this moment, they will in hindsight. And they will be able to continue to draw strength from it as they continue to 'do this in remembrance of me.' Which is not simply about repeating a ritual memorial over and over. Rather, it is an act that will enable the Spirit of Jesus to take his disciples lives and bless them, allowing them to see their lives as bread to be broken so that others might have life.

Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, has said that there is no better symbol of communal life than a banquet. Think about how many times we find Jesus eating in the Gospels: the feeding of the

multitudes, dinner with tax collectors like Zaccheus, Pharisees, Simon the Leper, Martha and Mary, and – in a post-Easter glimpse – the fish fry on the beach with the resurrected Jesus, just to name a few. Jesus eats with so many different folks that he is referred to as a glutton! And when he isn't actually physically eating, Jesus talks about eating in his parables. Like the one about the prodigally loving father who kills the fatted calf when his wayward son returns home. Or the King who, after initial invitees thumb their noses, invites everyone out on the streets. Outside of parables, Jesus frequently uses food and meals as symbols in his teachings – speaking of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, or admonishing 'don't labor for food that perishes,' etc. For Jesus, meals and banquets are clearly a metaphor for what the Kingdom of God is all about. People coming to the table – coming to be sustained, coming together, coming to be sustained together in community.

In his book, *A Bigger Table*, author John Pavlovitz writes that when Jesus, at this last meal with his friends, commands them to remember him whenever they gather around a table together, "he is inviting them to notice the holy in the mundane, to acknowledge [Jesus'] presence in the unremarkable, to make acknowledging him a part of the normal rhythm of life." Pavlovitz notes that remembering Jesus is one of our biggest challenges along our journey. But, he adds, if we learn to give meaning to even the most ordinary moments in our lives, we begin to develop a life that is "saturated with an awareness of the Divine."

Pavlovitz then goes on to write about how, as a boy in his large Italian family, at holidays and other special occasions, they would almost always outgrow the regular kitchen table and even the dining table. As family members would pull apart the ends of the dining table, his father would haul in two big leaves or extensions for the table and drop them in the gap in the middle. Then they'd pull up lots more chairs, until there was a place for everyone at the table. Pavlovitz describes this as a regular incarnation of the love [and inclusiveness] of God right in the center of their home. It was an example for him of the ever-expanding hospitality of God. It's worth noting that the early church regarded heresy more as a lack of charity or hospitality, and less as a wandering away from orthodox beliefs. Faithfulness was about extending the love of God to anyone and everyone.

In Jesus' world, sharing a table with someone is very much an endorsement of the other. It displays a willingness to demonstrate fellowship. It's a sign of respect. Which is why when he eats with the 'fringe element' – the lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors – he disturbs the 'proper' folk who think that if he really is a 'man of God,' a good rabbi, he should stay away from the 'less thans.'

Jesus uses table fellowship, table ministry, as a way of letting people know that they are seen and heard and loved and appreciated. With great regularity, Jesus uses the commonplace and mundane to show the miraculous and the extraordinary. Jesus uses the table – no matter whose table – as an altar around which to gather the world to experience communion (and community) with God as well as with one another.

Pavlovitz notes that when we seek to expand our table, that is, to be like Jesus, we will invariably be pulled in different directions by people who are more interested in claiming our allegiance than in extending grace to others. Sure, Jesus eats with his social equals, and probably sometimes with those who have the power to further his cause, but he also has lots of friends in low places. And those who are in no place. And that is the scandalous beauty of Jesus' guest list. By not being at all selective with his invitations, Pavlovitz says, Jesus affirms the value of everyone with whom he shares a table – he affirms it to them *and* to everyone who is watching from a distance.

This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. Words we have heard so often that perhaps, sometimes, we take them for granted. Nevertheless, they are words which bring us back, time and again, to this table for strength as well as solace, for renewal as well as pardon. They are words that allow the Spirit of Jesus to take our lives and bless them, opening our eyes and our hearts to see ourselves as bread to be given for the life of others. They are words that identify us as followers of Jesus. They are words that open us up to the miraculous in the mundane. They are the words of a banquet that draws us together around this table and invite us to draw up more chairs. They are the words, the image, the reality of our common life together.

In the words of a prayer from the workers in a community soup kitchen in one of the shanty towns of Lima, Peru, let us pray. (*Psalms for Peace*, Latinamerica Press, 5 November 1987.)

God, food for the poor; Christ our bread, give us a taste of the tender bread from your creation's table; bread newly taken from your heart's oven, food that comforts and nourishes us. A fraternal loaf that makes us human joined hand in hand, working and sharing. A warm loaf that makes us a family; sacrament of your body, your wounded people. Amen. +