

The First Supper

A sermon for Maundy Thursday

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

March 24, 2016

- Luke 22:1-23 ¹⁷ After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸ I tell you that from now on I won't drink from the fruit of the vine until God's kingdom has come." (Common English Bible translation)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Everyday food and drink remind us that Jesus leads us to serve God.

A few weeks ago our church had a chili cook-off. Two months ago we had a light luncheon preceding the congregation's Annual Meeting. Our worship on the Sunday after Christmas began with breakfast. We've had clambakes and potlucks and picnics. And don't forget, every Sunday we follow our worship service with "cookie time" lest we not make it from pew to dinner table without collapsing. Is it any wonder why as a church we poke fun at ourselves about how much we enjoy eating?

Truth be told, probably most congregations in most Christian denominations poke fun at themselves for the same reason: if we're having some church function, there's a very good chance that part of the function will involve eating or drinking *something*.

But I'd say that in doing so, we're following the example of Jesus and the apostles.

Sure, tonight we remember a particular meal they shared in an Upper Room on the outskirts of ancient Jerusalem on that night before the Jewish holy day of Passover was to begin. But it certainly wasn't the first time the Bible tells us about Jesus sharing a meal, whether with his apostles, other followers, or even with skeptics and antagonists. Let's recall some of stories.

Luke Chapter 6 tells one of my favorite "eating stories." Jesus and the Twelve were on the move, though not over a great distance as it was the Sabbath day and Jewish custom severely restricted travel on the Sabbath. They were cutting through a grain field. Imagine them walking through the tall stalks of grain, their fingers passing over the heads of the wheat. Some of the grains of wheat fell off the stalk heads and stuck to their hands, so the disciples would pop those grains into their mouths as they walked. So they enjoyed a little granola-snack-on-the-go. (We'll save for another discussion the point of the story, which was that some elders accused the disciples of engaging in the work of "harvesting.")¹

When Jesus coaxed Matthew to leave his accounting office and follow him, Matthew sealed the deal by having Jesus over for dinner.² Similarly, when Jesus coaxed the eager and curious tax collector Zacchaeus from his vantage point high in a sycamore tree in Jericho, how did Zacchaeus respond to being recognized and accepted by Jesus? By having Jesus to his house for dinner, of course.³

We know the story of the time when a prostitute came to Jesus, anointed his feet with oil and dried them with her hair. But we might have forgotten that this occurred while Jesus was eating—he was a dinner guest in the home of a skeptical religious leader.⁴ It was in a similar setting—while dining with a member of the Pharisee religious group—that Jesus told the "Wedding Banquet" parable. That was the parable in which a wedding host's friends all

¹ Luke 6:1-5

² Luke 5:27-39

³ Luke 19:1-10

⁴ Luke 7:36-50

declined his invitation to a wedding banquet, so the wedding host dis-invited them and instead invited the riff-raff from the streets because he knew they would be appreciative.⁵ Jesus told that banquet parable while he himself was at a banquet.

We know about Jesus and his disciples dining as guests in the home of Mary and Martha, with Mary sitting to listen to Jesus while her sister got all worked up because she had to hustle in and out of the kitchen to serve their guests.⁶

And of the eleven stories found in all four gospels, perhaps the most famous story involves Jesus and food. It's when Jesus directed his disciples to feed multitudes of people gathered to hear him preach, with a menu of five bread loaves and two dried fish.⁷

Besides the food-related episodes I just described, we know that over the three years they were together Jesus and his disciples must have dined together thousands of times. But on the night long ago which we commemorate tonight by gathering in this "upper room," Jesus told his disciples that he was eager to share *this* meal... and that "the writing on the wall" suggested it would be his last supper with them before he endured the fate he anticipated.

True, it would be the last time the disciples would sup with their teacher. It was their "last supper" with Jesus. But what Jesus instituted in this "last supper" would change the disciples... all disciples... in every time and place... including we who have gathered in Jesus' name tonight. Jesus gave them – and us – items from everyday life as symbols. These symbols remind us that we are not our *own* gods but rather we belong *to* God.

Something every one of us has in common is that we eat – every day. We drink – every day. We eat and drink to power our bodies, to lift our spirits, to satisfy our appetite, to engage socially with others. The twelve disciples ate and drank with Jesus thousands of times. But this was the *first* supper where he urged them to remember him whenever they had their daily bread and wine.

Food and drink would no longer merely satisfy hunger and slake thirst:

- Daily bread would also serve as a reminder of the bodily energy and effort that Jesus exerted, spreading word of God's love... healing hurting bodies and spirits.
- Wine, the everyday drink of his day, would be a reminder of lifeblood coursing through his veins to fire his passion for his heavenly Father. And the apostles soon would realize that wine would be a reminder of the blood Jesus surrendered as he allowed himself to be killed, a living self-sacrifice to cover the cost of humankind's ruthless, selfish, sinful attitudes and behaviors.

An upper room hosted the last supper Jesus would share with his disciples. But that last supper was the *first supper* to invite us to remember Jesus every day... to remember Jesus with ordinary items from our daily lives. Because of that "first supper," every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Jesus as our Lord who leads us in humble and obedient service to our God in Heaven. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim our Lord's death and resurrection until he comes again in glory.⁸

[sermons: se20160324; © 2016 Jon M. Fancher]

⁵ Luke 14:1-24

⁶ Luke 10:38-42

⁷ Luke 9:10-17; Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; John 6:1-14

⁸ See 1 Corinthians 11:26