



**“The Marriage Supper”**  
**Scripture – Revelation 19:5-10**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, September 7, 2014**

Have you ever wondered about the missing details in the life of Jesus? The four gospels shed light on many aspects of his life but there is a great deal they never mention. For instance, there is only one brief story about his childhood. Wouldn't you love to know what Jesus was like as a teenager? Who taught Jesus? Did he like to watch sporting events? Did he have nieces and nephews? Did he ever swim in the Sea of Galilee? The gospels tell us that he called several fishermen to be disciples, but they never tell us if Jesus enjoyed fishing. They never mention his favorite food, despite the fact that several times they mention Jesus eating a meal.

If they omit numerous details about Jesus' everyday life, why do the gospel writers mention something as mundane as a meal? Meals were a vital component of his ministry. In the culture in which Jesus lived, who you sat at your table revealed a great deal about you.

The most devout people of Jesus' day were the Pharisees. They shaped their lives strictly according to the 613 commandments in the Jewish Scriptures. Some of these laws were purity laws which designated certain objects as clean or unclean. Various foods were considered unclean, and were to be avoided. However, not only were pork and shellfish banned from the table, so were certain people. That is why there are several passages that note Jesus being berated by the Pharisees for eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors. First century cultural mores dictated that a virtuous Jew would never eat with a shady character.

I suspect Jesus got a kick out of driving the self-righteous Pharisees a little nuts. However, he ate with people the Pharisees deemed unworthy not simply to poke fun at their pomposity, but to send a message. He wanted to spotlight the inclusive nature of God's love. By eating with people considered outcasts, Jesus was saying, "Come! All of you! Everyone is welcome at God's table."

Today we focus on God's table and the special meal we followers of Jesus share with one another – the sacrament of communion. We often think of the Lord's Supper as a service of remembrance; a time to look back to the final meal Jesus ate with his disciples; a time to look back to the betrayal of Jesus; a time to look back to the crucifixion of Jesus. However, the Scriptures have another way of talking about the Lord's Supper – as a time to look forward to the full realization of God's kingdom.

Do you remember the words of institution for the Lord's Supper that are said when we break the bread and pour the cup? The one presiding over the table usually says, "Do this in remembrance of me" or "Whenever you do this, remember me." All four gospels highlight the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples, but did you know that Luke is the only gospel writer who quotes Jesus as saying to do this in remembrance? In both Matthew and

Mark, Jesus says, “I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” They speak of the Lord’s Supper, not as a time to look back, but to look forward; an event in the past that was pointing to the future.

And lest we come down too hard on Luke, rest assured, he knows that the Lord’s Supper is not simply about the past. Luke is the writer who tells the story of Easter afternoon when two followers of Jesus are walking the road to Emmaus. A stranger begins to walk with them and to engage them in conversation. They have no idea who this brilliant fellow-traveler is until they convince him to eat dinner with them. And when they break bread together, they realize it is the risen Lord. Jesus is not merely a figure of the past; he is with them and he is with us in the present and in the future.

Too often, the Lord’s Supper conveys the somber character of a memorial service. Some churches even use a large white cloth to cover the elements on the table to represent a funeral pall. The solemn prayers, hymns about dying and the words to “Do this in remembrance” make the Lord’s Supper a meal in memory of our fallen leader. It drops the crucial symbolism of the meal as a foretaste of the great banquet in God’s kingdom that is to come.

This morning’s text from the Revelation of John is a peering into the future when the powers of darkness will be vanquished and God’s kingdom will become fully present on earth. John has a vision of heaven in which a voice cries out, “Praise our God, all you his servants.” And John hears the voice of a great multitude respond, “Hallelujah!” Then, a voice shouts, “Let us rejoice...for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.” We are to understand that the Lamb is Jesus and his bride is the church. And finally, an angel says to John, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

In this text, the Lord’s Supper is envisioned as a rehearsal dinner for a wedding. It is a day in the future when Jesus, the groom, will be wed to his bride, the church.

If you have ever attended a rehearsal dinner, you know that it is a joyful occasion. The families and friends of the bride and groom share a special meal together. The guests talk about their connection to the bride or groom and many tell stories. A bridesmaid stands up to toast the bride and tells everyone that she was the sweetest college roommate ever and deserves a wonderful marriage. She lifts a glass and says, “May you share everything with your husband, especially all the house work!” The best man lifts a glass to toast the groom, “May you always be as happy as my mother-in-law tells me I am!” Stories pour out. Some touching, some embarrassing, but it is all done in great fun as the guests wish the couple a happy life and a lasting marriage.

While people share remembrances of the two, the excitement of the evening is not grounded in the past, but the future. The joy that permeates the room is not focused on what the bride and groom have done before; the enthusiasm is generated by the anticipation of what is to come.

That should always be an important aspect of the Lord’s Supper. When we celebrate the sacrament, we are to look with great anticipation to a new day, a day when God’s kingdom is fully present on earth. The prophet Isaiah said in that day the nations “shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks.” The author of Revelation says it will be a day when “mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” In God’s kingdom, every child, every woman and every man will have enough to eat, people will be generous with one another, justice will be enjoyed by all and the nations of the world will refuse to resort to arms to work out their differences. One day there will be an amazing marriage supper, and each of us will have a name card marking our place at the table.

A few years ago, when John Buchanan was the Senior Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, he and the officers of his congregation held an overnight leadership retreat at a nearby Roman Catholic seminary. At the end of a long day of discussion and planning, there was a reception in a large lounge. A variety of snacks were

on a table, along soft drinks and fruit juices. The Presbyterians munched on the snacks and chatted with one another.

At the other end of the room was a group of Roman Catholic priests and Catholic lay people. They, too, were having a retreat, and they were enjoying a casual break before dinner. At their end of the room was a table with snacks and beverages – soft drinks, fruit juices and bottles of wine. The Presbyterians were looking at the other reception with a bit of envy.

Among the Roman Catholics was their archbishop, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. He spotted the Presbyterians and motioned to them. “Come join us,” he said. And they did. Buchanan said, “It was a spontaneous, unplanned ecumenical celebration.” He called it “A kind of family reunion, a promise of what could be and ought to be and sometimes actually is. It was what God intends for the human family. People eating and drinking together, loving the gift of life, loving being together.”<sup>1</sup>

The labels of Roman Catholic and Protestant dissolved. The labels of conservative and liberal dissolved. The labels of rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, all dissolved. And they enjoyed food and drink together – some might even call it communion – and they felt the joy of people reveling in one another’s company. They told stories, they laughed, they felt the warmth of human ties and although no one stood up and declared it, on some level they recognized that they were soul mates, because each one of us is a child of God. It was a glimpse of God’s kingdom and the marriage supper of the Lamb.

This past week, a few of us attended an interfaith service of prayer and remembrance for those who died in the recent conflict in Israel/Palestine. At a church in Newark, we prayed and sang together, and listened to several speakers who expressed their sorrow over the death and destruction that has taken place the past few weeks. Each speaker talked about how we humans must stop killing each other and learn to live together in peace. The power of the moment was not so much in the message they delivered as it was in *who* the messengers were. The four individuals who spoke were a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian and a Sikh. Symbols identifying the different religions of the world hung on the wall behind them.

Following the service, we exited the sanctuary and walked into the fellowship hall where there were brownies and cookies, and an opportunity to chat with people of other faiths. In conversations around the room, people thanked each other for being there and they shared stories with each other. Some deepened old relationships, others began creating new bonds with people from other faiths. The divine image in each of us was touching the divine image in other. It was a brief glimpse of the heavenly banquet when people will come from North and South and East and West and gather around God’s table together. And there will be great joy and laughter, warmth and celebration.

That is the divine vision of what it will be like one day and God wants us to begin rehearsing for that day now.

## NOTES

1. John Buchanan, “Miracle at a Wedding,” January 17, 2010.