

Rich Lusk

4-21-11

Maundy Thursday Meditation

Feasting and Fellowship: The Family That Eats Together Stays Together (Jn. 13:1-36)

Community is about the convergence of our lives in Christ. It's about God giving us the gift of each other.

When Sartre said, 'Hell is other people,' he had it exactly backwards. C. S. Lewis was much more accurate in *The Great Divorce* when he pictured hell as people moving further and further apart. It's been said the best description of modern man is a person watching T.V. (or surfing the web) alone. That's a rather hellish description by biblical standards. The biblical image of the kingdom is most commonly that of face to face fellowship across a table; it is an image of corporate feasting.

William Willimon on American selfishness:

[W]e live in a social order that is individualistically organized. What we call society is little more than an aggregate of self-interested individuals. Today, American society is a kind of vast self-fulfilling prophecy: a society that was designed to work on the presumption that people are self-interested tends to produce that kind of people

William Barclay:

More people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world, and more people have been driven from the church by the hardness and ugliness of so-called Christianity than by all the doubts in the world.

Randy Booth has a helpful meditation on the Lord's Table as the model table:

The Lord's Table is the archetype of our family tables. Or perhaps we should say that our family tables *should* be an imitation or reflection of The Table. We come to the Lord's Table each Lord's Day to be fed by the Father, Who meets our needs above and beyond all that we could ask or think. He has given us life. He sustains that life. He protects that life. The Table is the very image of fatherhood; the essence of which is love. We begin each week gathered around the Table as children to be instructed and nourished, just before we are sent out to live. And so too, we go to our homes and gather around smaller tables to be instructed and nourished, and from there we also fan out to live. The liturgy is practice for life. We gather again and again around our tables—small societies of Christians—learning to commune and share, to pray and talk, to receive and give thanks, to serve and be served, to love one another and to be renewed. We cannot neglect such an important

huddle without the fragmentation of our little societies. Develop it, guard it, and practice it often.

Peter Leithart provides a helpful communion meditation:

1 John 3:17: Whoever has the world's goods and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

John insists, as we've seen, that love must take specific, concrete form among believers. Love is not just fellow-feeling, or sympathy, or well-wishing. Well-wishing without action is faith without works, James says, and this kind of faith cannot save us. If we do not assist our brothers in need, the love of God is not in us; and if the love of God is not in us, then we remain in death, and are Cainite murderers.

Jesus is the great example of this kind of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. Though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor; He was exalted, but for our sakes He humbled Himself; though equal to God, He took on the form of a servant; though lord, He became slave of all; He had all the world's goods, and when He beheld us in our desperation and need, He did not close His heart against us. He is the revelation of God's eternal love; He is Love Incarnate.

That's the gospel we celebrate at this table every week, the gospel of the self-giving Son of God. This table is an extension of that love. God has shown His generosity in sending His Son, and now manifests that generosity again and again by welcoming us to His table. This table displays the hospitality of God.

But this table is not only a celebration and remembrance of that gospel. It's an enactment of that gospel. This table trains us to enact the love of God toward one another. You receive bread, and you pass it on; you receive wine, and you give it to your neighbor. The world's goods are given into your hands, and you give it to your brother in need, not closing your heart against him. As we pass the bread and wine from hand to hand, we are ritually enacting the economy of God's people, the economy of generosity, the economy of gift, the economy in which we all come to share in the hospitality of God.

This table can be belied by our actions. If we pass the bread and wine to our brother, but then ignore his needs when we see him begging on the street tomorrow morning, we have become liars. This table is to shape and reshape our relationships with one another, training us to be open-handed and open-hearted not only here but everywhere.

You have benefited from the hospitality of God; go and do likewise. Freely have you received. Freely give.

Building community means we have to not only take care towards old friend, but we also have to be aware of strangers in our midst. The Christian life is a life-in-community. There is no such thing as a “solo Christian” or a “lone ranger Christian.”

Martin Luther:

I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, as Christ offered himself to me...We ought... each one of us to become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians...And just as one member serves another in such an integrated body, so each one eats and drinks the other; that is, each consumes the other in every drink, and each one is food and drink to one another, just as Christ is simply food and drink to us. Through believing the word which the soul takes and receives into itself, we eat the Lord. My neighbor in turn eats me together with my possessions, my body and my life; I give him this and everything that I have and let him make use of everything in all his needs. In the same way when I in turn am poor and in trouble and need my neighbor, I'll allow myself to be helped and served. And in this way we are made part of one another so that one helps the other just as Christ has helped us. This is what it means that we spiritually eat and drink one another.

Luther:

As Christ has become the common possession of us all...we should also become common possessions of one another.

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If you are learned, you should not use your teaching for your own advantage but to serve your brethren. If you are healthy and your neighbor is weak, see that you strengthen him. If you see a husband who is disagreeing with his wife make peace between them. If you do not do this, you do not have the mind of Christ. If you are rich and see that your neighbor is poor, serve him with your possessions; if you do not do this you are not now a Christian.

In other words, Luther is saying that in the communion of the saints, the rich should help the poor; the smart should help the dumb; the healthy should serve the sick; the young should minister to the elderly; etc. The haves should what they have to the have-nots so that all needs in the body are met.

Luther saw the Lord's Supper as central to this kind of communion. He said in the Eucharist, we receive “a sure sign of community and incorporation into Christ and

all the saints." As Althaus puts it, for Luther, "As Christ is our food and drink in the Lord's Supper, so we also become food and drink for each other. This means that I give everything which I have to my neighbor who needs it and conversely that I allow him to help and to serve me in my poverty."

C. S. Lewis:

It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and must uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations -- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit -- immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously -- no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner--no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ vere latitat -- the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.

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The ancient communion prayer from the Didache:

As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains, And was gathered together to become one, So let Your Body of Faithful be gathered together From the ends of the earth into Your kingdom; for the glory and power are Yours forever.

A modern adaptation of the prayer:

As grain that was scattered on the hillside was gathered together and made into one loaf, so too, we, your people, scattered throughout the world, are gathered together around your table and become one. As grapes grown in the field are gathered together and pressed into wine, so too are we drawn together and pressed by our times to share a common lot and are transformed into your life-blood for all. So let us prepare to eat and drink as Jesus taught us: inviting the stranger to our table and welcoming the poor. May their absence serve to remind us of the divisions this sacrament seeks to heal, and may their presence help transform us in the body of Christ we share. Amen.

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In the sermon, I spoke of pride as an obstacle to community. We certainly see this in the Pharisees in the gospel accounts. The Pharisees' self-righteousness makes them sectarian and divisive forces within Israel. The same kind of pride can rear its ugly head in the church today. For example, when Christians make too big a deal out of secondary "lifestyle" choices, it is easy to become arrogant, looking down on others who are not so "enlightened" and have made a different choice. The same can happen with spiritual gifts or doctrinal knowledge. Many of the things we are tempted to take pride in may be good things in themselves, but they must be possessed and used in the right way.