



## *“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”*

Mark 14:1; Corinthians 10:14-16

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

**February 1, 2009**

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Post Falls, Idaho, lies just east of Spokane, Washington, at the edge of the Bitterroot Range. Just outside town on the banks of the Spokane River is Ross Point Camp. Years ago, on a Sunday afternoon, a small group of us met there to prepare for the coming week of camp.

Our assignment was likely not the first choice of any of us, certainly not mine. The next morning one hundred junior high students would arrive for church camp. We were the camp staff, all volunteers. I was one of two pastors; the rest were laypeople from the churches. The Dean of the camp recruited me to be the speaker for the week, and in a weak moment I agreed. It was a daunting challenge at the very least.

We went over the organization and plans for the week. Then we took turns sharing our expectations and fears for the week. I think the word “terror” is a bit strong to capture the spirit of the moment, but it was quite clear that all of us knew we faced a task larger than the capacity of any or of all of us. The churches and parents entrusted us with the physical, social, and spiritual well being of one hundred early adolescents.

Then we prayed with a real sense of urgency, humility, and dependence. Someone suggested we have a spontaneous communion service. It seemed like a good idea, so several of us went to the small kitchen in our building to search for material for communion. It was a challenge. Church camps don’t keep wine around, and this kitchen had no bread. The best we could do was Kool Aid and soda crackers.

The pastors made an executive decision that such elements could indeed constitute genuine communion – at least in emergency situations. In the most informal setting imaginable we shared Kool Aid and crackers in the name of Christ.

It was one of the most memorable experiences of my spiritual and pastoral life. We had the very real sense that Christ the Lord was among us as he promised. Those simple physical elements seemed to make God “have-able” in our moment of need. And we also felt Christ empowering us to do the difficult work we’d come there to do.

But there’s more. We also had each other. We were a unique community formed by Christ and empowered to be something beyond ourselves in order to do work that only God can do.

That is a cameo of what Holy Communion intends to do to us. At this sacred meal at the Lord’s Table, we have God. Christ comes to us when we come to him at his table. And we have each other. We come to Christ’s table as a community of faith.

On the long, complicated and difficult journey of life and faith we are not alone. We have God and we have each other.

On the night before he died, Jesus gathered his inner circle of disciples and they had their last meal together. He'd already given them an overwhelming mission: to establish God's will on earth, one person at a time. You talk about the audacity of hope! At most he had about one hundred disciples, and his leadership team had not yet distinguished itself – in fact, they'd all run for their lives before the night was over.

The odds were overwhelmingly against them. And what they didn't know that night was that the one who called them to God's service would die the next day. The prospects of the Christian movement didn't look good.

What should Jesus say to his ill-equipped and unprepared followers now facing an impossible task? What could he do to get them started on their mission?

It was a Passover dinner, a sacred meal, and Jesus didn't say much but he did do something quite remarkable. He told them he was about to be arrested and executed. Then he took some leftover bread and wine and told the little group to eat the bread and drink the wine. The bread, he said, was his body given to them, and the wine was his life poured out on their behalf. What he meant was this: no matter what happens, you have me – forever.

He made that simple meal a sacred meal. "Do this whenever you meet," he said. "Come to my table! Meet me here. Come to me here. Here you will find strength for the journey. I'll see you in church!"

Ever since, this sacred meal of promise and power stands in the center of the life of Christian Church. And from the beginning, God's people have sensed that this sacred meal is a unique and extraordinary moment.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth reminding them that at the table we participate in the resurrection life of Christ. We "share" in the body and blood of Jesus, he writes. Simple signs, bread and wine, communicate the love of Christ for us. Here, at the table, we see signs and experience a bit of the kingdom of God on earth.

Back at Ross Point Camp, away from our ordinary lives, waiting for the helter-skelter of teenagers at church camp, time stood still for just a moment, and the love and peace of God seeped into the room and our lives. We tasted a bit of the age to come.

Miles away and separated by years, I had a very different kind of communion taste of eternity. In 2001 I was a Fellow at Cathedral College, part of the ministry of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

While I was there George Carey, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, came to visit the cathedral and the college. He presided at a special Eucharist service in the chapel of the college. The chapel seats only 30 or so, and only invited guests participated in the service.

As a Fellow of the College I was invited. The cathedral and college are Episcopal. We Congregationalists rebelled against the Church of England 400 years ago and haven't been on regular speaking terms ever since. I felt honored to be invited.

The service was lovely, to borrow an English term, and properly Anglican. It was stately, orderly, peaceful, beautiful, and filled with grace. I made my way to the altar where I received communion from the hands of one of the great figures in the modern church. In that act, one of the great fissures in Christ's church was momentarily healed. The church was one. I tasted a bit of the kingdom of God.

In a world hopelessly divided and endlessly hostile, in a church tragically and sinfully divided, stands an act intended to bring the world and church into unity. In Christ, St. Paul writes, none of the dividing lines exist any longer. Christ's cross, he says in a vivid metaphor, has torn down the dividing walls that separate the human family. It is

significant that in our tradition in Europe, the only symbols on the communion table are a loaf and a cup. We who are many are a single loaf, one cup.

Perhaps most tragic of all, Holy Communion, the sign of the unity of the church is, in fact, a point of conflict and division. The sign of inclusion has become a matter of exclusion. The sign of God's universal, unconditional love is a hotly debated point of contention. The sign of God's great shalom, the salvation of the entire creation, creates angry voices and a shattered church.

The communion table proclaims a great symbol. One loaf is broken signifying Christ's brokenness for us and, at the same time, that one loaf speaks of the church as the one body of Christ. We've spent centuries with differing traditions doing their own thing in their own way paying little or no attention to each other or the larger Christian church.

Part of the good news I bring you today is that a new day has dawned. There is a "mind of the Church" taking form and moving the church in a new direction. One of the great achievements of the Ecumenical Movement of the last century is a theological document published in 1982 titled, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry."

It is a remarkable document that is quietly and powerfully moving the churches toward unity centered in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Theologians from every Christian tradition (except Roman Catholic) agree that communion must be restored to its central place in the life of the church.

The churches are moving toward a common and ecumenical liturgy for communion. Various traditions are opening themselves to one another in order to enrich their own practices. We are learning to gather around one altar/table as one community where we find God and each other.

This is no small thing. I first experienced its power in the early days of my ministry. In our little town in the Pacific Northwest a wonderful thing happened. For a brief moment in time the churches and the ministers actually united around the Lord's Table.

Before it was popular, or in some cases, permitted, we had an annual ecumenical communion service. We held it at the Methodist church since it was large enough to hold all who came – and they did come!

I will never forget the power of the first time. I knelt there and received communion from my friend and Methodist colleague, Don McCauley. Then Bob Raines, the Lutheran pastor, knelt in front of me and I served him the holy meal. Then the people came to kneel and receive communion from us. There I served the entire people of God in a grand theological, historic, and ecumenical gesture. I've never been quite the same. Nor has that little town.

All this points to Plymouth Church on a Sunday morning in A.D. 2009. Here we are, a diverse collection of traditions, backgrounds, and religious experiences. We live in a daunting world filled with challenges larger than our capacity to solve them. There's plenty to worry about: staying married, raising children, surviving a recession, coping with complicated workplaces, caring for aging parents, being part of the church in times like these. We know life is larger than our capacity on our own.

The good news I bring you is this: we are here in sacred space where we gather weekly to gather the scattered resources of our souls. Here we have God and here we have each other. And uniquely, powerfully, at this holy table, God meets us and we join one another on our knees before God. In fact, we join the entire people of God on earth and through the ages as we come to Christ at his table.

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**Sermon 01 Feb 09**

This sacred table proclaims for all to hear and see that in all of life and faith, we have God. Jesus Christ invites us to his table and to himself, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened down, and I will give you rest.”

There is something empowering and properly humbling about getting our faith out of our heads and into our bodies at this table. Walking to the front for communion, as we do every other month, wonderfully activates faith, makes it physical as well as mental. And, more important, here we have God and we have each other. We join each other as we come to Christ and his table. Here we join the church in all of the world at a holy meal surrounded by love, peace, and joy.

We have God. We have each other.

Back at Ross Point Camp, the campers did show up, all one hundred of them. We ran our programs. I did my best to speak to teenagers. And, thanks be to God, we enjoyed a real religious experience. There was drama, of course, these were early teens. Amid laughter, tears and strong emotion, God was at work. But it was more than group excitement in a religious setting. I know God was with us. Molly, one of the counselors, told me on Wednesday that she was sure God was working. Campers in her cabin were asking forgiveness from others for creating cliques and saying mean things about each other. They repented of jealousy and asked for God’s peace and love. No wonder our evenings were filled with such joy. We were experiencing the age to come here and now.

I’ll never forget it. And now neither will you.

I’ll never forget Holy Communion at Plymouth Church either. This is my spiritual home, and when I’m not here I miss you. I love seeing this community at work – in worship, at the fellowship hour, and in ministry. And serving communion in this holy spot is a highlight of my life. It is no less than a taste of the kingdom of God. I see love from God’s heart. I feel the peace of God’s Spirit. My heart springs up in joy. We have God; we have each other. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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