

“The Last Supper: A Feast of Love” Part 3: Agape Meal

This is the third day we are meditating on the death and resurrection of Christ by sitting with Jesus and his disciples in that upper room the night before he was betrayed. Monday we prepared ourselves to enter into that Passover meal. Yesterday we watched Jesus stoop down and wash his disciples' feet. Today we reflect on the meal they ate and its significance for us today.

[Read **Luke 22:21-34**]

It was a Passover meal, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And as we said on Monday, it was a very ritualized and traditional event in the Jewish life. Some have estimated the pilgrims who came for this festival swelled the city of Jerusalem to as many as half a million people. They came to remember and celebrate how God delivered their people from Egyptian slavery.

Joachim Jeremias, a German Lutheran theologian, studied Jewish life around the time of Jesus and has reconstructed the way the Passover meal was practiced. There were four parts to the meal: the preliminary course, the Passover liturgy, the main meal, and the conclusion. A cup of wine was shared in each part. Psalms 113-118 were read aloud. A young person asked, “Why is this night different from other nights?” And an elder replied with the faith statement from Deuteronomy 26 that begins: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...”

The food consisted of unleavened bread, green and bitter herbs, a sauce of fruit puree, and of course, roasted lamb. This was not a fast-food meal. And they reclined on pillows as they ate, rather than in an upright position as we do today.

By eating this Passover meal, they were keeping alive the memory of God's saving grace, who led their people out of captivity, through the wilderness, and on to the Promised Land. Through this ancient event they were celebrating their continuing covenant with the Lord God who continues to provide for God's people under all circumstance.

It was traditional for families to get together to celebrate this meal. In Jesus' case, he ate with his new definition of a family – “*My family,*” he said, “*my mother and my brothers, are those who hear the word of God and do it.*” Jesus' family of close disciples, the Twelve apostles, ate the Passover meal together.

But this last supper together inaugurated something new as well. It anticipated the coming kingdom that Jesus had preached about. As they shared one of those cups of wine together, and after Jesus blessed it, he said, *"Take this [cup] and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom comes."*

And a bit later that evening, Jesus addresses the ongoing dispute among the disciples about who was the greatest. After making clear that they were to be servants, not masters, he pointed to the future, after his own death. He spoke of the coming kingdom of God. He said, *"I confer upon you, just as my father has conferred upon me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom..."* He was speaking of a time when the fullness of God and his kingdom would be complete. It is described as a great banquet hosted by the Messiah. And it is prophesied in Isaiah 25: *"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines strained clear."* It's a day when God will swallow up death and "wipe away the tears from all faces." It will be a day of gladness, and people will rejoice in God's salvation. What better way to imagine the coming of God's kingdom than with a banquet of rich food and drink!

Is it any wonder that Jesus spends so much time eating and drinking while here on earth? Unlike John the Baptist who shunned great feast, Jesus was criticized for eating with the wrong kind of people. He said, *"The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you [the religious leaders] say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"* (Luke 7:34). Several of his parables were about banquets – feasts when a lamb was found, when a lost coin was discovered, when a lost son returned home. A great feast where invited guests didn't show up, so servants went out into the streets and lanes of the town and brought in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame (14:15-24).

Is it any wonder that after Christ's death and resurrection, his appearances are often around a dinner table? He breaks bread with two disciples in Emmaus? He joins the frightened apostles in the Upper Room and eats broiled fish. And along the Sea of Galilee he provides breakfast for the disciples who have been fishing all night long.

These images of eating and drinking rich food at a great banquet seem to fly in the face of Jesus' impending death. Here Jesus will soon be making the supreme sacrifice of himself on a cruel cross. And we're talking about party time. Jesus is certainly pointing beyond the cross when he speaks of

eating and drinking in the kingdom of God. Perhaps he's telling his disciples that his death is not the end of this great thing that God is doing to bring the world back to wholeness and healing. Perhaps he's saying that even as they face into their own suffering and loss, that God is still at work. God is greater than death, and there will be rejoicing on the other side. Love will one day win. And there will be a feast of love.

It seems that after Jesus' death and resurrection, and after the birth of the church on Pentecost, followers of Jesus came together regularly to break bread together. They called them "love feasts" according to Jude. And when they ate and drank together, even when there were only two or three who were gathered in Jesus' name, they discerned his presence. It was in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine around a common table that they rehearsed the coming messianic banquet. It was a time together when they imagined a world healed of its violence and hatred. A time when everyone, rich and poor, strong and weak, Jew and Gentile, men and women, would come together and experience the kingdom of God among them.

We still live in a broken world. A world still divided by nationality, by culture, by race, by gender, by ethnic identity, by religious tradition—a world that has yet to experience the fullness of God's kingdom. But we keep before us the vision of the great messianic banquet—where the walls are broken down, where enemies become friends, where strangers are welcomed.

Let me tell you about a Brethren couple who had this kind of experience. A number of years ago Chalmer and Mary Faw were teaching at a theological college in Northern Nigeria. They were helping to train ministers and evangelists from about 30 different diverse tribes and nine different denominations. They were asked to lead the monthly Holy Communion service. So they did it Brethren-style.

The foot-washing was new to many of them, but they soon caught on and found it meaningful. But it was the communal meal that was most noteworthy, Chalmer said. He writes,

"Since, in Nigeria, we always had the communicants bring their own food, there were students with pounded yams, some with rice, some with millet, and [some] with guinea corn mush and greens, to say nothing of American and European foods! Then Nigerian style, everyone felt that he or she should share with every other tribal group. So they got up out of their seats and began cruising around through the room, joyously dipping out food for each other, almost bedlam but so beautifully Christian that no one

felt like stopping them! To be honest, this almost stole the show, and I had a hard time getting the group to quiet down and celebrate the bread and the cup in the deep, spiritual manner that we wanted.

"It was a love feast such as I had never experienced before or since. And many were the thankful comments I received from non-Brethren Nigerians as to how wonderful it was the way tribes intermingled and shared, a symbol of peace and unity they would never forget."

Such are the moments when we too catch a glimpse of the world-to-come envisioned by Christ. May our times of breaking bread together remind us of the abundant life that God intends for the human family.

Prayer¹

We give you thanks, O God, for the mighty sweep of your love, embracing all people and all nations. We thank you that you have sent Jesus Christ to us to break down the walls of hostility which divide the earth's people, and to reveal your all-encompassing love, making us all one.

We confess to you our lack of unity with our human brothers and sisters. We have closed our ears to voices of pain and of wisdom, when they speak in accents other than our own. We have lacked the vision to see that people living in places we call foreign are as surely your children as we are. Our sensibilities are jarred even by the way our nearest neighbors express their faith in Christ. We cling to the pride of nation and denomination as if we had a special claim on truth and leadership.

Gracious God, forgive us, and renew a right spirit within us, a spirit of compassion, understanding and humility. Fill us with the vision of unity in Christ, and enable us to incarnate Christ's love, so that we may worthily partake in the body of Christ and the wine of the new covenant. Amen.

¹ Ruth C. Duck, *Bread for the Journey*, pp. 12-13.