

GRACE AT THE TABLE

Luke 5:27-32

October 4, 2009

(World Communion Sunday)

Jesus said, **Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.**

I celebrated my thirtieth birthday on September the twentieth! Sadly though it wasn't two weeks ago or even fifty-two, really. It was back in the 1900's when I was the pastor of two little churches at Beaver and Blue Jay. And my good friend Steve, who is a pastor in Fairmont now, asked me to come preach at his church. On my birthday. And it wasn't even a Sunday, mind you. It was Wednesday or Thursday. They were having what he called a Circuit Rider Revival, because each night they had a different preacher. And he wanted me to preach on the last night of their revival. "And come early," he said. "We're having a covered dish dinner before the service." Which I've never understood, really. Because people nod off in church. Especially when the service is late in the evening --

2

after they've worked all day. And then you add a big, starchy meal full of mashed potatoes, and gravy, and casserole, with some Parker House rolls to the equation and they'll be dropping like flies! But ... that's how they do things out in the country. Not that I was complaining, mind you. I *wasn't*.

And then came dessert. Two women came from the kitchen with a huge birthday cake. Which didn't surprise me, really. Because it wasn't just my birthday, it was Nate's birthday, too. Steve's little boy, mind you -- who's about the same age as Kristof. And I knew that, already, We have the same birthday. The cake was for him. So he blew out all the candles and everybody sang, "Happy Birthday."

And then somebody said, "It's Preacher Tom's birthday, too." And they sang "Happy Birthday" again. To me. And this time, Steve came out of the kitchen with a box. And he said, "This is for you. It's from all of us here at Meadow Bridge!" And that kind of thing isn't easy for shy people. Believe me. And opening presents while other

people are watching has always been a little embarrassing for me. I don't know why. It just is.

But I opened the present. (And as I did I kept thinking, "What if they don't *like* the sermon. They'll wish they could have this back -- whatever it is.) And there in the box was a handmade, earthenware communion chalice and a bread plate. Handmade by a man who lived there in the community. It was the best thirtieth birthday I've ever had. Really.

Well, it was just about time for the service to begin. And believe it or not it's a tradition at Meadow Bridge to end their time together at a revival with the Lord's Supper. So Steve said, "Tom, would you like to use the chalice tonight for Holy Communion?" And I thought it'd be great! It would be like giving to the people who had given to me, feeding the very people who had fed me that evening. So he took the plate (the paten) and the chalice into the kitchen and washed them. And he poured the wine and put a loaf of bread on the plate. And we carried them upstairs and set the Lord's table for Holy Communion.

And they gathered in the sanctuary. And we sang some old hymns and the service began. And that night we prayed for each other and we lifted our hearts in worship. And I preached on the great miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand to a little group of people who were wondering not how so many people could be fed by so little, but how a little group like them could have eaten so *much!*

And then the time came. We sang, "Let Us Break Bread Together." And as we sang, Steve went to the altar to uncover the elements. And he took the chalice in his hands and he raised it up toward the cross, as if he were lifting it up to God. And then he turned toward the congregation and carried it slowly from the altar, down the center aisle with dignity and warmth. And just as we started the last verse, he reappeared at the back of the church and he carried the chalice to the altar, lifted it up toward the cross, and just as we finished the hymn, he placed it gently on the altar.

I was almost in tears. "I've never seen anything so beautiful," I thought, "and so *meaningful.*" It was such a

powerful symbol -- God giving the gift of his Son to us in the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. And it was as if Steve was the messenger, the *priest (in a way)* who was carrying the gift from God to the people. And then at the end he brought the gift of the people to God. It was wonderful! Jesus our Brother was being offered to God to free all of us from sin and death. I was in tears. I was. Tears just rolling down over my cheeks.

And we had communion that night at Meadow Bridge, a wonderful service! And after everyone had received, we covered the bread and the cup. And we sang, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love..." And as people were leaving the church, Steve and I were putting things away. And he looked at me and said, "Did you see what I did? With the chalice, I mean? And I said, "Oh my, that was wonderful! I've never seen anyone do that before." And he said, "Well ... I've never had to do that before."

Something about the way he said that didn't seem to fit. "What do you mean?" I said. And he said, "I went back there and took the linen from the chalice, and there was a

big old fly in there! A fly on the Lord's table. Right in the communion cup! That's why I did what I did. I had to get that thing out of there! So I carried it to the back of the church and then I ran down the stairs, dumped it in the sink, rinsed the cup out with a little soap and hot water, ran like a madman back up the steps, and brought it back up here!"

And I said, "What? What was a fly doing in the Communion cup?" ✕ I realize now, of course, that that was not the right way to ask that question. But there it was. "What was that fly doing in there?" And Steve said, "The backstroke you nitwit, how should I know?"

Something just didn't fit. It just didn't belong at the Lord's table. Holy Communion -- especially the wine or the juice -- is no place for a fly! It just doesn't belong there! ✕

Let me ask you ... have you ever felt that way? That you didn't fit? That you just don't belong at the Lord's table? That you're too ... I'm not sure how to say it? Too bad. Too weak. Too selfish. Too sinful. Have you ever felt like you

don't measure up? You don't have the right to receive the sacrament because you're so unworthy?

Sometimes. Not always ... but sometimes I feel like the most unworthy person in the world. Which is probably not what you'd expect to hear from your pastor. But it's true. Sometimes I feel like I couldn't be any more sinful. It's kind of like an "occupational hazard," I guess. I don't know why, really. It just is. I mean, Paul felt the same way. *Saint Paul*, mind you. The apostle of grace. He told Timothy, his dear friend, that Jesus came to save sinners... "Among whom I am the foremost," said Paul.

So at least *one* other preacher knows the feeling. The truth is a lot of folks do. Because sometimes ... maybe not all the time, but sometimes we all feel like we've missed the mark. (Which is what the word "sin" means, you know.) And if you've ever felt that you've missed the mark or fallen short -- if you've ever felt sin-stained or scarred or unworthy somehow, you're not alone. We've all felt that way. Some of us are better at feeling that way than others, I think. But it's there. It's there for all of us, at

times.... And it makes you wonder, doesn't it? What's a Savior like Jesus doing with sinners like us?

One morning our worship teacher, Will Willimon, told us about his first appointment after seminary -- his very first church. He'd been there about a month or so and decided that it was time to have Communion. So after the sermon that Sunday, he gave the invitation to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And ***no one came forward.***

And it bothered him. I mean he was troubled. He was perplexed and confused. So he went to several of the church members that week to find out what went wrong. Because he thought it was him. It *had* to be. He offended them, somehow. He'd hurt their feelings or insulted them without knowing it. So he asked them why they didn't come forward to eat the Lord's Supper. And at every home he heard the same answer: ***I'm not worthy.*** So the next Sunday he preached on this passage in Luke -- the calling of Levi. And the title of his Sermon was, "***What's a Savior Like You Doing with Sinners Like Us.***" And as he thought and prayed and searched the scriptures for

something to say the next Sunday, he discovered something about Jesus' eating habits. And this is what he discovered -- **Jesus always ate with sinners. Always. Without exception.**

Just look at the meals in the gospel of Luke, sometime. Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners. And mind you, the sinners Luke's talking about here were sinners with a capital "S", you could say. They weren't your everyday, ordinary, run-of-the-mill sinners like us. These folks were *official!* Labeled by the priests and the leaders of the Temple. They were pronounced unclean. Forbidden at the Lord's temple. They didn't belong. They didn't fit there ... because they were unworthy.

But Jesus ate with them. Rubbed elbows with them at the table, mind you. And the funny thing is ... eating together, sharing a meal (especially in those days) was a close, personal, intimate thing to do. You didn't eat with just anybody. You ate with companions. With friends and family. With good, decent, God-fearing people. Because to break bread with someone you have to sit close to them and share and serve and listen ... and practically rub

elbows. And here was Jesus doing that very thing with the riff-raff. With hucksters and thieves and hookers and sinners. Down-right *ungodly* people they were.

And that was a problem... A *big* one as far as the Temple leaders and bible scholars were concerned. Because... well, you know what they say, "birds of a feather flock together. And they saw Jesus getting all up-close and personal with a bunch of tax-collectors and sinners -- people who ranked right up there with hookers and home-wreckers and pond scum, mind you. I mean, he was having dinner with Levi, one *of* them. And all the other guests were the kind of people a good, decent, church-going person wouldn't be caught dead with! And yet, there sat Jesus! The rabbi! The teacher! The one everyone claimed to be the Son of God! The anointed one! The Messiah!

So the bible scholars and Temple teachers saw his disciples and asked them why? Why does you eat dinner with the likes of those people? Why do you rub elbows with people who are so ungodly? And Jesus heard them. And he answered them, **It is not the healthy people who**

need a doctor, you know. It's the ones who are sick -- the ones who long for healing and wholeness. I haven't come to call the "righteous." I've come to call sinners to repent, to be healed, to turn to God.

And that's why Jesus always ate with sinners. He was reaching out to them to feed them, and fill them with his healing, redeeming, soul-mending love.

And that's how it is when come for the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, Holy Communion, we call it. We come not because we are sinless, but because we are sinners who need forgiveness and grace. We come not because we are perfectly whole, but because we are broken and need healing and grace. We come not because anything that we are or do makes us worthy to come, but because Jesus is worthy and we long for his touch of grace in our lives. And that grace makes a difference. It changes us from the inside out. It heals what is broken inside us and makes us whole.

But let me tell you a little story about two young boys -- one who was welcome at the Lord's table and one who

was not. The first was born in a little village somewhere in Eastern Europe. The other was born three years later in El Paso, Illinois. And they both had a dream -- the same dream, really. For they each dreamed of becoming a priest some day. And so they both trained as altar boys who would serve at the altar of the parish church when they celebrated the Mass, or what we call Holy Communion.

One day the boy in Eastern Europe was assisting the priest with communion. And the unthinkable happened. The boy accidentally knocked the chalice off the altar and the wine spilled on the floor. And the priest whirled around and struck the boy with the back of his hand. And he shouted, "You clumsy oaf! Leave the altar and never come back!" And he didn't. In fact, he grew up hating the church. His name was Josip -- Marshall Tito, they called him when he was older. The communist dictator of Yugoslavia ... and an atheist who had no use for religion.

The other boy assisted the priest at St. Mary's Church in Peoria, Illinois. And the same thing happened to him. He accidentally knocked the chalice from the altar, spilling the sacramental wine all over the floor. And he was

horrified. And he burst into tears. And the priest whirled around and threw his arms around the boy. And he knelt beside him and said, “It’s all right, it’s all right. Everybody makes mistakes. God knows that ... and yet he loves us!” And he knew about his dream, so the priest said to the altar boy, “Someday you will be a wonderful priest!” And he came back. The Father insisted. And he was welcomed at the Lord’s table. And that young boy became a priest. An archbishop, in fact, who brought the good news of God’s love to thousands of people. He may well have been the most famous priest in the United States -- the beloved Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

You don’t have to be perfect. You don’t have to be faultless. You don’t have to be without sin when you come to this table. Can you imagine what might have happened if Marshall Tito had heard that when he was a boy? Jesus said, “I’m here for you. I’m here for those weak, and broken -- I’m here for those who have missed the mark.” And he invites you to come. The only requirement is that you come hungry. Hungry for new life.

Hungry for the love that Jesus gives. Hungry for his presence. Hungry for his grace....

Oh, what’s a Savior like Jesus doing with sinners like us? He is reaching to feed you, and fill you with his healing, redeeming, soul-mending love. So come... come to the table and be filled with Christ Jesus.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Benen, OblSB

