

Subtle Table Turning

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Thursday, April 13, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Movement 1 – The Powerful Dinner of Holy Week

Tonight we are invited to sit and dine with Jesus. We are invited to understand, experience, and get to know Jesus at a very profound and very human level. We are invited to sit and dine with Jesus. It is amazing that the simple act of eating is one of the most sacred events in this week. We eat every day, we break bread every day, and Christ enters into that cycle, that pattern, that mundane ritual of human life, so that we can experience the presence of the divine. Tonight we are invited to sit and dine with Jesus.

So tonight, I call you to experience the physical nature of Christ through the tearing of bread. Tonight I challenge you to experience the physical nature of Christ through a shared cup. In eating and drinking, we can remember that Christ was indeed fully human. In eating and drinking we can remember that Christ was also someone who shared pains of hunger, who enjoyed the nectar of grapes, and who shared fellowship, who shared the table with his friends. We must remember and experience that Christ was indeed fully human on this night and take that experience with us to tomorrow so that it may hold any power and profundity. Don't wait until tomorrow to take note of the human nature of Jesus, but here, at the table, take note of his nature today. For today, at the table, Christ has something to offer. Christ will leave us with something, with hope, with a way of life that we will carry with us. Jesus invites us to the table so that we can experience his humanity in the most profound way. Jesus invites us to the table so that we can know him through the basic ritual human action of eating. Jesus invites us to the table and makes it holy, sacred and divine. Jesus invites us all to the table.

Movement 2 – The Intimate Relationship with Jesus

At the table, Jesus serves us. He wraps a towel around himself, he kneels and he washes our feet. He touches us, he cleanses us, and he asks to serve us. Jesus invites us to the table but not just to eat at our side. Jesus invites us to the table, but not just to watch us eat. Jesus invites us to the table to physically sooth our tired bodies and our tired spirits. He performs the act of the host and the servant at once by washing our feet. He crosses all boundaries, all expectations, and all assumptions when he picks up that bowl of water and brings it to our feet. Jesus invites us to the table to serve us.

This is a close and intimate relationship that Jesus is creating. It is that kind of relationship one finds when taking care of someone who is sick, in bed. Changing the sheets and the dressings, bringing the food, helping the individual eat, and changing the bedpan makes your relationship intimate. There was a story on the radio show *This American Life*, about a young teenager who suffered second and third degree burns all over his body. He had to spend months in the burn unit and was primarily cared for by one nurse with green Converse low tops. Through the nurse caring for him an intimacy grew. It was not an adolescent crush; it was not a scandalous relationship, but a knowing, and an understanding that emerged between the two of them.

In the same way Christ is serving and taking care of us at the table. He is tending to our wounds, our wearied spirit, our heavy sighs, and our fallen hopes. As the water washes over our feet the cleansing act of the cross also washes over us. It is a new thing that Christ is doing; a new relationship with God. Christ isn't just asking us to stand with him. Christ isn't just asking us to walk with him. Christ is asking us to be served by him. In being served by him, we draw closer to him. In being served by him, we become intimate with him. Oh, can you see yourself looking at Christ on the cross and remembering how just last night he took your very feet and washed them? Can you let yourself be served by Christ? And can you do it on Christ's terms. Don't stand up like Peter and tell Jesus how to serve you. Don't stand up and demand specific actions by Jesus. Just let Jesus help you in the way that he sees best. Just let Jesus serve you in the way that he knows best. Each time we gather around this table we are called to remember the ways in which Jesus serves us, tends to our needs and cares for us. Each time we gather around this table we are called to remember relationship we have with Christ through his service, through his tender care. Jesus invites us to the table so that he can serve us and deepen his relationship with us.

Movement 3 – Serving Others at the Table

Jesus invites us to the table, serves us, and we serve each other. We take the bread and we pass it to the person next to us, serving that person next to us. We take the cup and we offer it to the person next to us, serving that person next to us. In gathering at this table, in passing the plate and the cup, we try and we strive to serve each other just as Jesus serves us. For in his act of washing our feet, Jesus is creating the church. Jesus leaves us with a challenge, he leaves us with a blueprint for the church; this fellowship at

the table, is to be a place where we are served and where we can serve.

We are invited to the table to serve each other. So we need to keep our eyes open to each other's pains and trembling. We need to take risks with each other and share our own needs and trembling. We need to serve each other at this table. In one of the most basic rituals of human life and in one of the most profound rituals in our Christian life, we gather around the table to serve each other. Look each other in the eye and say, "Christ serves you, the body of Christ was broken for you, I serve you." Look each other in the eye and take the plate, take the open hand, allow yourself to be served, to be helped and cared for by each other. For this is a mandate Christ leaves with us; to serve each other.

We are invited to the table to serve each other, and as we do so, our relationships with each other will deepen just as it does with Christ. Our intimacy will increase just as it does with Christ. Here at this table no one is alone. Here at this table no one is isolated and no one eats alone. Here at this table we are served, we serve, and for a moment we become the church God calls us to be. The apostle reminds us in 1 Peter 3:8, "...has unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind." When we sit at this table and remember the ways in which we have been served by Christ, we achieve the exhortation of the apostle. When we sit at this table and live the service we are called to have for each other we achieve the exhortation of the apostle. We are all invited to the table to serve each other.

Movement 4 – Bringing the Intimacy of the Table to the World

Jesus invites us to the table, who will we bring with us? Jesus invites us to a meal where we know God and are served by God. Jesus invites us to a meal where everyone serves everyone else, and there is a profound nature to the relationships. Who will we bring to this table with us? Jesus invites us to the table, who will we bring with us?

Imagine that this table stretches farther than the walls of this room. Imagine that this table goes to the place where the horizon touches the sky and beyond. Imagine that this table goes on and on, and there are empty seats. There are moments when we have to stand and walk across empty seats to serve each other, whom will we bring with us to the table. There are people outside looking in, yearning for human contact, yearning for compassion and community; whom will we bring. There are people outside looking in wanting to know that there is a God who loves them and will take care of them. Whom will we bring? Whom will we bring to the table?

We will invite them by serving them. We will show them the table by being present, by offering an open hand of compassion, by offering an ear that will listen and a heart that will care. We will "spread the gospel with our actions, and words if necessary." We will invite them to this community, this church, this table, by showing them this community, this church, this table. Jesus invites us to the table, and we invite others, so that we can share the bread and the cup with the world. It is like the wedding banquet in that great and glorious day. It is that moment when all of God's children are gathered at the table serving each other and being served by Christ. Jesus invites us to the table, whom will we bring.

Movement 5 - Bringing the table with us to the cross

Jesus invites us to the table to show us one more time who we are to be and what we are to be. Jesus invites us to the table and then goes to the cross. Stay at the table as we follow him to the cross. Lean on each other as we watch our savior lifted up. Lean on each other as we lean on Christ. Stay at the table, in the community and in the presence of Christ as we remember, as we live and as we are served by Christ. Tonight you are invited to the table, not to serve but to be served by our Lord, by our Savior, by our Friend and our Comforter. Today we are invited to the table to be served by our Lord. May we let go and let God serve all our needs.

AMEN