

The Table of Communion
Exodus 25:23-30, 37:10-16
9/29/2013

When you love a person, you want to spend time with that person. You want to commune with that person. Very often that means that you will eat meals with that person. Having table fellowship with a person you love can be a very rewarding and satisfying experience. In fact, we would really have to wonder if a person was lying if they said they loved a person, but didn't want to spend any time with that person. In this passage, we learn that God loves us and wants to spend eternity with us, and this includes a rich feast indeed.

Before we get into the details of the table, it will be helpful to say something about why everything is said twice in Exodus about the tabernacle. In chapters 25-31 we have the instructions given to Moses. In chapters 32-34, we have the tragic interruption of the golden calf incident, and God's forgiveness and restoration of the people. Then, in chapters 35-39, we have an almost verbatim repetition of the instructions, only framed in terms of how those instructions were fulfilled. Why all the repetition? There are four reasons for this repetition. The first reason is that it shows Moses being the faithful communicator. The incident with the golden calf did not get in the way of Moses being faithful when it came to proclaiming God's word. Secondly, we see the contrast between things that are made by human art and imagination, versus things that are made by God's own instruction. Of course, human art and imagination are not always idolatrous. Human art and imagination can do amazing things, many of them good and edifying. However, the people in the golden calf incident were trying to create their god in the image they wanted. They were filled with idolatry, whereas Bezalel and Aholiab were filled with the Holy Spirit. Fourthly, God wanted to show them His grace. He was still going to be their God, and the proof of that was in the continuing work on the tabernacle. It shows us that forgiveness is not an end in itself, but leads us back to worship and communion with the living God. The Christian faith is not only about forgiveness and reconciliation, as important as those things are. But those things exist to serve the worship of God, and to create worshipers of God. Those things help us to understand why there is this level of repetition about the things of the tabernacle.

It is significant that while the ark of the covenant was the most important piece of furniture in the Most Holy Place, the table was the most important piece of furniture in the Holy Place. If the ark of the covenant emphasized God's holiness and His greatness, and His separateness from us, the table in the Holy Place emphasizes the other side of the coin: God's wanting to be with us and commune with us and take care of us. We can see these things in the details of the table itself.

The first thing to notice about the table is the frame that went around it. It was a handsbreadth wide, and came up from the edges of the table. You can see this in the picture provided for you on the insert. This frame was important, because it prevented the bread of the presence from slipping off the table when the table was being carried. This brings us to a very important passage in Leviticus 24 that we need to read in order to understand what is going on here. Leviticus 24:5-9 says:

And you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it. Two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. You shall set them in two rows, six in a row, on the pure gold table before the Lord. And you shall put pure frankincense on each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, an offering made by fire to the Lord. Every Sabbath he shall set it in order before the Lord continually, being

taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the offerings of the Lord made by fire, by a perpetual statute.

The bread of the presence was made into twelve loaves, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. So, when the priests were eating the loaves every week, they were representing the communion that Israel had with their God. The priests were communing with God for the people, vicariously, if you will. Notice that detail also that they ate the bread of communion every week. The bread itself is called the "shew-bread." It is the bread that is displayed every week before the Lord and before the priests. It represents the communion God has with His people. In some ancient cultures and religions, food like this was supposed to feed the god they worshiped. Here, however, notice that it is God who feeds His people, not the people feeding God. This feeding would remind people of the manna that they ate in the wilderness that God provided for them. God can feed multitudes on such bread. Remember also Jesus feeding the five thousand with just a few loaves of bread, and picking up twelve (!) basketfuls of bread left over. Even more important is God's Word, since man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Now that we have seen this fellowship through bread, it becomes clear what the significance of the molding around the table is. There was one loaf for each tribe of Israel. And the molding prevented that bread from slipping off the table when the table was being carried from one place to another. It is a beautiful picture of how the Lord takes care of us and prevents us from slipping off into condemnation. He preserves us. We often talk, in Calvinistic circles, about the perseverance of the saints, but it is just as accurate, if not more so, to call it the preservation of the saints. I often tell my children when they are carrying a cup full of liquid that the milk, or whatever it is, doesn't know that it's supposed to stay in the cup. Similarly, the bread of the presence didn't know that it was supposed to stay on the table. We are often ignorant of things that we do that are very dangerous for us, but God puts up that hedge of protection around us.

In verse 29, we learn about the dishes, pans, pitchers and bowls for pouring that were also supposed to be stored on top of the table. Obviously, those things are not directly related to the bread of the presence, but I think we can see another principle at work here. Those were the dishes and bowls associated with the altar of incense. They symbolized prayer, as the book of Revelation tells us when it mentions the prayers of the saints ascending up before God just like the sweet incense of the Old Testament worship did. So here we can see a connection between the communion with God that He is concerned to give us, and prayer. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, then, we must always do so with prayer that God will bring His grace to bear upon us.

This brings us to a consideration of the Lord's Supper, which is a fulfillment of the table of showbread. The communion between God and His people that is represented at this table is heightened and perfected in the Lord's Supper. The priests were supposed to eat the bread of the presence every week. We are now a kingdom of priests and partake of a far better food: Jesus Christ Himself. But what does that mean? What is the nature of the Lord's Supper?

To answer this question, it is helpful to remember how the Bible classifies the Lord's Supper. What things are alike it in the Bible? In Acts 2, we read this about the early converts to the Christian faith: **And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' those things. They were regularly participating in those things.** This passage is what led our Reformed forefathers to

call Word, Sacrament, and Prayer the three regular means of grace. They were regular, because they were to happen frequently, and also because God works through them the most. So, if we want to know what the Lord's Supper is, we have to see that it is similar to the Word and to prayer.

It is similar to the Word because the Lord's Supper is not only inseparable from the Word, but is itself a kind of preaching. In a preaching word. The mode is different, of course. The Word of God preached is something we hear, while the Lord's Supper is something in which we use primarily our other senses, like tasting, feeling, seeing, and smelling (though we also listen to the words of institution!). But the Word and the Sacrament belong together, because they proclaim the same thing: Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and coming again on the final day.

Furthermore, the Lord's Supper works in a very similar way to the Word. Preaching and the Lord's Supper are both like seed scattered on different soils, as in the parable of Jesus about the different soils. Both the preaching and the sacrament are received by faith, and can only do us good when received by faith. Also, they are both means of *grace* leads His people to the green pastures of the word of God, and the Lord's Supper. It is Jesus feeding His sheep. We feed on the same thing in the Word and sacrament. In the preached Word, we feed on the written Word of God. In the Lord's Supper, we feed on the incarnate Word of God, since Jesus is the true Word.

The Lord's Supper is also very much like prayer. To understand this point, we need to remember the presence of the Holy Spirit in both. The Holy Spirit bridges the gap between heaven and earth so that we can feed upon Jesus. The Holy Spirit also presents our prayers to the Lord, interceding for us. In the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit brings Christ to us, and brings us to Christ in the bonds of that holiest matrimony. In prayer, the Holy Spirit both brings our prayers to God, and brings God's power and answers to us. So, it is helpful for us to see how the Lord's Supper is similar to preaching and prayer.

However, the ultimate meaning of the Lord's Supper is that we are eating and drinking Christ, spiritually speaking, and we are eating and drinking with Christ, and having the closest fellowship that it is possible to have with the resurrected Christ here on earth. If we really love Christ, we will want that fellowship. It will be sweet to us. And we will want it as often as we can get it. Are you hungry for Jesus? Do you want Him? He gives Himself to us, wanting out company in return! Is that not most amazing?

There are several things that can spoil our appetite for Jesus Christ in the sacrament. The most important of them is division within the body of Christ. There is an entire letter of Paul devoted to the issue of church unity in the face of division as it relates to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and that is 1 Corinthians. Cliques were developing in the church at Corinth, when not forming any kind of cliques intentionally or unintentionally here at Lebanon Presbyterian Church. Several weeks ago, I preached a sermon in which I issued a warning to parents of children that we cannot be uninvolved in our children's education. In that sermon, I laid out some of the concerns that we need to be aware of regardless of what school our children attends, though I admit that sermon was geared towards those families whose children go to public school. Now the shoe must go on the other foot, and I must warn about the dangers attending homeschooling that can seriously affect the body of Christ. I have heard reports that families of public-school children are starting to feel like they are not welcome in the church. The last I checked, being homeschooled was not a requirement to belong to the body of Christ. It is not the only way of raising godly children. The dangers

attending homeschooling (and I can say this with some integrity, since I was not only homeschooled myself since the fourth grade, but our family is also homeschooling: so I am stomping on my own feet first!) are the following: arrogance and pride, a looking down on other people, an assumption that if you homeschool, your children will turn out all right (and, by the way, that assumption is FALSE!) and a developing of a homeschool clique that doesn't let other people in. This can quite easily destroy our communion at the Lord's Supper, and it can rip the church to shreds. The solution is fairly straightforward to understand, even if it requires much: make a special effort to befriend those families that are not like you, and make a special effort to have your children befriend those children who have different schooling situations. It is all too easy to develop a clique unconsciously. The people you spend the most time with tend to be the people you are most like. The people you spend time with during the week are the people you talk to the most on Sunday. It takes an effort to cross the boundaries of differences and extend the love of Christ to those who are different from you. But that is what we are called to do. Paul says in Galatians, and I am adding an application to his words: For there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, circumcised or uncircumcised, home-schooled or public-schooled, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. We need to make sure that nothing spoils the sweetness of our communion with the Lord Jesus Christ. For, in the Lord's Supper, we celebrate the oneness we have with Jesus, and the oneness we have with one another in Christ.