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## Eating at a Table Set with Purple

a sermon on 1 Corinthians 11.23-26

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

I hope you have come to worship this morning anticipating the Lord's Supper. Did you wake up and realize the special opportunity waiting for you and think, "Wow! I can't wait to get to church!" I did. Part of my growth as a Christian has been a deepening appreciation of the grace we receive at the Lord's Table. The Lord's Supper was a big reason I became Presbyterian in the first place. Our conviction that this is not just something we do, but God also does something – well, I believe that and I cherish it. Christ gives himself to us as we eat and drink.

I also believe that each season of the church year brings out the meaning of the Supper in a special way. The season does not give the Supper its meaning. The meaning is always there. Each season, however, helps us to recognize and experience part of what the Supper means.

Think of it this way. The Lord's Supper is deep, profound, even mysterious. We feed on Christ in our hearts by faith when we partake. How does that work exactly? That's not something we were meant to figure out. It is enough to know that it is so. The Lord's Supper looks back to the cross. It touches the present, because Christ comes to us where we are. The Supper anticipates the future when we will eat and drink in the kingdom of God. The Supper, then, is anything but simple. It carries loads of meaning. OK, so think of a person you know. People are deep and complex – they can be anyway. You think you know someone, then they surprise you. You have surely noticed how different experiences with a person help you get to know that person better. Being together through different times achieves the same result. My friends in my Doctor of Ministry studies, my family, the people of this church – they all know me. But, although I am the same me no matter where I am or who I am with, each group gets to know me in a different way. I think the Lord's Supper is like that as we celebrate it through the various seasons of the church year. The Supper does not change, but our perspective does, and the different perspectives we take through the year help us experience the fullness of the sacrament.

For example, Lent calls our attention to the death of Jesus, which factors prominently in the Supper. And that significance is always there. We never celebrate this sacrament without recalling Jesus' death for us. That's just not possible. During Lent, this significance commands the full attention of our hearts and minds. The Supper also

celebrates the fact that we have a living Savior. He is present with us, and he gives himself to us, every time we eat the Supper. The season has nothing to do with that. Every time we eat and drink, we commune with the risen, living Jesus. The Easter season, however, uniquely highlights this important truth. So you see, each season brings out something special about the Supper.

Another way to think about it is this: Imagine a precious stone, like an enormous diamond. Different light brings out the beauty of the stone in different ways. The same stone, with the same inherent properties and beauty, expresses that beauty uniquely under different kinds of light.

If I am right about the Lord's Supper and the seasons of the church year, what special insight does Advent offer us? Let's think about that. Advent is a season of preparing for the coming of Christ. Advent looks forward. Advent lives in hope and anticipation. Advent would be dissatisfied with the present moment if it ever stopped to think about the present moment. Why? Because God has more to do! Advent sits on the edge of its seat straining to see what God will do next. Although the present moment has some problems that God will remedy, Advent doesn't notice the problems so much as the anticipated solutions. When you are in an Advent state of mind, the present moment hardly matters at all. God's future, hurtling toward you at a blinding speed, occupies your full attention. Of course, we all live in the present. But when you're waiting for God's promises, the present is not the same, even with its problems. The present becomes a time of joy also. Not because life is so good right now, but because God's promises never fail. Therefore, in the present moment, we live with both our problems and God's promises; and in that situation, God's promises are bigger, more interesting, and more worthy of our attention. The future God has prepared for us is so powerful that it changes how we live now.

Every knee has not bowed nor has every tongue confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord. Scripture assures us this will happen someday. Right now, God's reign is disputable. Many people do not believe in God at all. Again, scripture promises us that someday the glory of God will be evident to all. It hasn't happened yet, but it will. Until it does, Christians are supposed to live *as if* it has already happened.

How do we do that? To take one example, we confess Jesus as Lord and try to honor him with our lives. We know he is Lord of all. We live that way now. Another example: What makes more sense, striking back at those who hurt you or forgiving them? Most people would say striking back. You can't let people push you around. But when we look at Jesus, at the cross, when we hear his teaching, the other answer would be his choice. Christians ought to follow in Jesus' footsteps. In the long run, his choice makes the most sense. This assumes of course that God judges sin and forgives those who forgive others and raises his children to eternal life. Most people do not live

according to these truths because they do not believe they are true. We know they are true, so we live by them – at least we try to.

So that's Advent. Advent anticipates the future God has prepared for us. In fact, it anticipates God's future so much that it is willing to live as if God's promises are true – because they are.

What happens when we come to the Lord's Table in an Advent frame of mind? I have already mentioned how the Lord's Supper not only looks back in time to Jesus' death and at the present moment to discern his presence with us, but it also looks forward to his coming again. Someday we are going to sit at table with Jesus, and with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of God. Even if this promise has a poetic, metaphorical quality to it – so that we are not talking about a literal table or meal – it still describes a concrete reality. Who knows? Maybe it is talking about a literal table and a literal meal. I'd like to think so, but even if it isn't, it still points to a real experience we will have in the future when God's kingdom finally comes. Our celebration of the Lord's Supper looks forward to that day. What we do at the Lord's Table always has a provisional quality to it. This is not all there is. This is not all that God has in store for us. It is a precious gift Jesus has given us. It is, along with baptism, the most important part of the Christian life. Yet there is more! Keep in mind, anticipation is always part of the meaning of the Supper, no matter when we celebrate it. Advent helps us experience this part of it more clearly.

Our scripture reading contains the oldest written account of how Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper. The Christians in Corinth had trouble getting the Supper right. Paul wanted to set them straight, so he gave them pointed instructions, and among them he included the institution of the Lord's Supper. I would call your attention to the end of our reading, verse 26. He wrote, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes.*" Our action at the Table proclaims Christ as we wait for his coming.

You may have noticed, by the way, that when I say the words of institution I add a little something. I always say, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *and resurrection* until he comes." The Resurrection is so important I can't bear to leave it out. A long time ago I thought I was very clever and wondered if I was the first to do this. It turns out, Basil the Great made the same addition to the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and millions of Orthodox Christians have head this every week for over 1,600 years. Oh well, I'm not an innovator, but at least I keep good company. Besides, it's not good to be an innovator where sacraments are concerned. God gives them to us. They are not ours to do with as we please. I stand by my mention of the resurrection, though, because the cross and Resurrection go together so closely.

Getting back on track, other scriptures reveal the Advent quality of the Lord's Supper. In Luke's account of the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples, "From now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." That was probably his way of telling them this was his last meal. Notice how these words affect the mood at the Table. *Something* is about to happen. This meal is preparing us for *something*. They could not hear those words, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom of God comes," without looking toward the future with the uneasy feeling that God's kingdom was about to hit them with the force of a runaway freight train. If that's how they felt, their gut instinct was right on target. That was Thursday night. By Sunday night the world had changed completely. The three crazy days in between tore them apart down to the foundation of their souls. Jesus sat down at table with them and told them, basically, "*The decisive moment in God's plan of salvation just arrived.*" Are you ready for it?

At that Last Supper Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper, commanding his disciples in every time and place to eat and drink in memory of him. His Last Supper was a Passover meal. This means it was a special meal that said some important things. It said God reigns. God is in control. It said God saves. God rescues his people. The original Passover happened during the days of Moses, just before Israel left Egypt. Listen to this verse describing it: "This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD" [Ex 12.11]. In other words, even while you are eating it, be ready to go at a moment's notice where God will lead you.

The Passover always looked both forward and back. Back to the Exodus from Egypt; forward to the salvation God promised his people. By the time of Jesus, the looking-forward part had become more important than the looking-back – although the two cannot be separated. The God who rescued Israel before will be faithful to his people and save them again. That's the significance of the Passover. The Lord's Supper carries the same meaning. Christ, who came before and gave himself for us on the cross – whom the Father raised from the dead so that he lives and reigns even now – will come again to finish what he started. When you look back to the cross, you see your Savior who will at last bring you to God's kingdom. And when you look forward to God's kingdom, you see your Savior who ransomed you for God at the cost of his own life.

Today you get a rare treat. You get to eat at the Lord's Table in a sanctuary decorated with Advent purple. The next time we celebrate this sacrament will be Christmas Eve, and that occasion brings a distinct perspective of its own. Today is Advent. We come to the Table, and the full meaning of the Supper is there, as it always is. Jesus' death, his presence, his grace, the way he gives himself to us, the way we give ourselves to him. Yet, in our Advent state of mind, the meaning we see most clearly perhaps is the anticipation. Christ has died. Christ is risen. *Christ will come again.* God is not finished yet. He is not finished with this world he made. He is not finished with you. This meal

represents a taste, a little sample, of God's kingdom. If it helps you to think about it this way, it may not be entirely unlike the little samples you get at the grocery store. They give you a little bit of food on a toothpick, hoping you will like it enough to buy a pack. God gives you a foretaste of his kingdom, with the promise that he will give you the full experience in his time. Then you will see God face-to-face. Then you will love perfectly, even as he loves you now. Then your heart will be pure and you will never know evil again. Now, as you wait for that, Jesus gives himself to you. As you eat and drink, you feed on him in your heart by faith. He is not physically present in the bread and cup, but he is literally and spiritually present as we eat and drink. He comes to us today to give us grace and to assure us of his promise of eternal life with him. ... Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com