

**Eating with Sinners  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
1 October 2006  
World Communion  
Text: Mark 2:13-17**

The story is told of a guy appearing at the pearly gates and being welcomed in by St. Peter. "Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?" the man questions, "I've done some things of which I'm quite ashamed." "Oh," came the response, "We don't keep records here." The man was overwhelmed with gratitude. Then he saw a group of people clenching their fists and banging their heads against a wall and stamping their feet in disgust. "What's the matter with them?" St. Peter answers, "They thought we kept records too."

The gospel of grace provokes vastly different responses—from relief to offense. On this, the first of the month of Sundays kicking off our 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we will consider our broadest bonds, our most ecumenical affirmation: the saving grace of God's love embodied in Jesus Christ. This is the truth that unites us with Christians throughout the world, that creates from different nations, ethnicities, and human conditions, one family. World communion: the gospel of grace at its most inclusive.

And yet, wherever this gospel is preached it also divides people, be it in a reaction of relief or offense, to those with a sense of entitlement, dismayed that it might be offered to undeserving ones. So it has been since the days when Jesus walked on earth, preaching and healing and announcing that the Kingdom of God is *here*, right under our noses. Nowhere does the exclusiveness of grace come into sharper focus than at the supper table. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the second chapter at the 13<sup>th</sup> verse (p. 36 chapel/pew Bibles). [Mark 2:13-17]

I forgot a cardinal rule of ministry on my very first Sunday here. The cardinal rule is that a new pastor is not supposed to make any changes in the church for at least one year, to give the congregation and pastor time to get used to each other. I guess I thought removing the bouquet of flowers from the communion table was not really a change, but simply a clarification. After all, it's not a piece of occasional furniture like a sofa table, but a meal table, the symbolic reflection of the nourishment offered by Christ in the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Well. I shouldn't have been surprised. Few topics have prompted more argument in the Christian church than the Lord's Supper. And perhaps nothing about it attracts more controversy than the question of who is welcome here.

Who can come to this table, for whom is this bread and this cup?

Membership has always been a big category. You have to be a member of the church, *our* church. You have to be baptized, you have to be confirmed, you have to be a participating member of *this* congregation.

Then there's belief. You have to believe the right things. You have to understand what's going on with the bread and the thimble-sized cup of grace juice. You have to be ready to swear on a stack of Bibles that Jesus is the divine Son of God and my personal Lord and Savior. Have you prepared in your heart for receiving the elements? I remember attending a church camp one summer where the presiding minister asked that question (I thought rhetorically) and then thundered back a Bible verse, *if you drink this cup unworthily, you drink it to your damnation*. Whew! That made you hesitate.

And don't forget tradition. Some rules and customs around the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are simply a matter of practice. Are children included or not? Are the elements

covered or uncovered? Will the people come forward, or be served in their pews? Who can serve? Ministers? Adults only? Elders? Deacons? Let me check the Book of Order!

The Church is in good company when it struggles with questions of welcome. Jesus was continually criticized by the religious leaders of his day for his table companions. He quickly gained a reputation for eating and drinking with sinners, for deliberately including people who were outside the bounds of the "good" community. Furthermore, he invited them without first requiring any change. He made no rules or set any conditions on those with whom he broke bread. He included everyone.

Or did he? *I have come to call not the righteous but sinners; those who are well have no need of a physician.* Jesus concentrated his ministry on the spiritually sick; on the hungry outsiders; not the righteous but the sinners. Jesus proclaimed an exclusive gospel: it's only for those who need it. Not very many of the religious establishment who heard Jesus placed themselves in that category. They had their rules, they knew what they needed to know, they did what they had to do. And the greatest tragedy of those good people was that they never knew what they missed, never experienced the joy of a gift they didn't earn, or taste the heady wine of amazing grace they didn't deserve.

And what about us? It's so easy to come into this beautiful chapel/ sanctuary and see only beautiful people who are so together, so competent, so successful, so.....perfect. It's so easy, and it would be so wrong. Barely beneath the veneer of our smiles are hearts that are broken; spirits that are discouraged; minds that have made compromises about what is truest and best. Some are here, estranged from ones they love. Among us are persons with questions, with doubts, with unresolved anger, with secret sins believed too awful to confess. Can any of us claim we are without need? Can we picture others who aren't here, who need what may be found only here?

So I say let's keep struggling with our welcome. I'm pleased that a new Diversity Council headed by elder Steve Minter will help us consider ways of enlarging the table, of opening our doors wider into our community. But I also sense that our connections with each other who are already here can become stronger by eating together in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance; to trust one another with our burdens as well as our joys, our failures and disappointments as well as our successes; our questions as well as our certitude.

Who is welcome at the Table? Let the children come. A woman in a former congregation who had been Sunday School superintendent for years questioned the advisability of this. "They don't understand what's going on; they don't get it." "And you do?" I wanted to ask (but probably didn't). Let the unknowing and the unwise and the know-it-all pastor come. Let the record keeper and the robber baron and the wronged come. Let the loser and the liar and the lion-hearted come. Let the ones in pain and the ones who are a pain come.

Jesus is at the table with an exclusive invitation. Only the needy. Only the hungry. Only the spiritually seeking. Only sinners. Only the hurt and wounded. Only ones who are afraid. You and me.

This is the Lord's Table, the bread and the cup he offers us here is medicine for the soul. God's grace heals us and reunites a world separated by human conditions and categories. This Table is the place where we come together, where we find in our common need, that we are one.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER!  
AMEN.

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