

An Invitation to the Table

A World Communion Sunday Meditation

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"When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'"

— Luke 22:14-16

In case it wasn't immediately obvious to you, you are looking at an image of my feet (*image 1*). Lovely to behold, I know, but that's not the point. In this image, I am standing in two places at once. It's true! My left foot is in the Indian Ocean, and my right foot is in the Atlantic Ocean. In 2012, I was at the southern tip of Africa where the two oceans converge. I even took a picture of the bronze plaque that declares it to be so (*image 2*).

I couldn't help myself, so I walked out into the water behind that plaque and took a photo of my own feet. One foot on in one ocean. The other foot in another ocean. You may have thought it to be a human impossibility, but I have done the impossible, my friends! I have been in two places at once.

But do you know what I saw when I stopped staring at my own feet and I looked up?

For all the world, I saw only one body of water (*image 3*). There was no clear line, no division between the two. Behind me there was a man-made plaque telling me that what I was looking at was two oceans. But if it hadn't been for that plaque, I would have assumed it was one ocean. And I started to wonder who put that imaginary line there, because I don't think it was God.

On World Communion Sunday, we are reminded that what Christ accomplished on the cross has torn down the imaginary boundaries that we've decided separate us.

I've told you before that there are 62 distinct baptist denominations in the United States alone. Imagine what that number is worldwide! When I read that list and see "General Association of Baptists" right next to the "General Association of General Baptists" right next to the "General Association of Regular Baptists," I can't help but wonder what man-made plaques got erected telling these folks that they were multiple bodies rather than one body.

When I look at that list and I see "Separate Baptists" listed as a denomination, I have no choice but to believe that they came by their name honestly. You don't get called "Separate Baptists" unless you separate from someone. And wouldn't you know it, just one slot down from the "Separate Baptists" are the "Separate Baptists in Christ." What man-made plaque got erected between those folk convincing them that some were faithful and some were not, and so they could no longer be one body?

We keep trying to put up plaques, don't we? We keep trying to categorize ourselves and others, so that we know who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong. We keep drawing imaginary lines. But when Jesus looks at us, he doesn't see Separate Baptists or Separate Baptists in Christ. He doesn't see Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopalian or Methodist. He doesn't even see saints or sinners. When Jesus looks at us, he sees one body bound by one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6).

I think we sometimes forget that there is a reason that Jesus was often accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. It was because of the company he kept at meals. Jesus ate with sinners, with prostitutes, and even with tax collectors. There was no person so beneath Jesus that he refused to share a meal with them. No person was out of bounds for Jesus.

That's because, for him, table-fellowship could be the very means of healing. By accepting such folk as friends and equals, Jesus removed their shame, their humiliation, and their guilt. By showing them that they mattered to him as people he gave them a sense of dignity and released them from their old captivity.

It's interesting then, isn't it, that we are so protective of Jesus' table? What if instead we were more like Jesus and believed this table could be a source of healing?

Brennan Manning tells this story: "I once met a pastor in the hills of Colorado who invites a family to his rectory every Sunday afternoon for a home cooked meal. Frequently the guests are unchurched or ex-churched. During my visit the fare was simple, but the company and conversation stimulating. This family shared the deep hurt inflicted on them by a previous pastor and why they consequently discontinued churchgoing. But that afternoon they received consideration instead of expected condemnation, a merciful acquittal rather than an anticipated verdict of guilty. They returned to worship the following week. They had been healed by an ordinary Sunday meal" (*A Glimpse of Jesus*, 57-58).

The communion table is the symbol of coming together. And at its center is Jesus Christ.

New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, points out that one of the things that is absolutely unique about Luke's telling of the last supper is that Jesus "has the apostles recline 'with him' rather than he 'with them.'" In the other gospels, Jesus reclines "with them." But not in Luke. In Luke, Jesus is central, and so they recline "with him." (*The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 3, 337).

When we come to this table, Jesus is the host. And if we know anything about Jesus from the gospels, it is that he will share the table with all sorts of riffraff — even Separate Baptists and General Baptists and Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists. He will even share the table with you and me.

When I was in South Africa standing in the water where those two oceans meet, I was there with my mission professor from seminary, Dr. Caleb Oladipo. Dr. Oladipo is a native of Nigeria.

After I took that photo, I walked out of the ocean, hauled myself back up the rocks to where Dr. Oladipo was sitting and I told him how strange it seemed to me that someone had decided that this one body of water was now two distinct oceans. "It seems so artificial," I said.

Dr. Oladipo shook his head in agreement and said, "You know, in other parts of the world, the oceans are seen as the great bodies of water that separate us from one another. In Africa, we don't see the oceans as the things that separate us, but as the one body of water that binds the world together."

The Lord's table is like that. It's not the thing that separates us, though we sometimes convince ourselves it is. It's the thing that binds us together — across denomination, across nationality, and through the generations.

I was talking with a friend from Virginia a few weeks ago, a member of my former congregation and she reminded me of something we once did for a communion service there. The sanctuary had been decorated for Pentecost in a Taizé-style with hundreds of cinderblocks and hundreds of candles and red fabric everywhere. And we had pulled an old exterior sanctuary door out of storage and had used some of the cinderblocks to keep it standing straight up.

The door dated back to when that old, southern Virginia church would not let some people into worship based solely on the color of their skin. That day, the pastor preached on how we sometimes put up doors so that we can keep certain types of people out of the church. At the close of the sermon before we took communion, without a word being said, a few of us got up, walked up on the stage, rearranged the cinderblocks into legs, lifted that door up, and laid it on its back — turning it into a communion table.

My friend said, "Dan, I will never forget seeing that thing that was used to keep people out of the church being turned into the communion table — where all are invited."

But that's exactly what Christ did on the cross. The cross, which was a tool meant to keep people in their place, became the very means for our inclusion in the church.

And so, he overcame all of the ways we divide and separate and parse one another out, and invites us to eat with each other instead. He says, "I have eagerly desired to eat this meal with you," and *he means it*. It doesn't matter if you're a sinner or a saint. It doesn't matter if you're prostitute or a tax collector. It doesn't even matter, God help me, if you're a Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptist. Jesus wants to share this meal with you.

Amen.



Image 1: Two place at once, straddling the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.



Image 2: Plaque declaring the dividing line.



Image 3: One body of water.