



FEASTING WITH GOD

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Exodus 24:1-11

Fifteenth Message

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Ten days ago, I was reminiscing with one of my sisters about our first Thanksgiving dinner. I was nine years old at the time, and we were at a mission boarding school high in the mountains of central Malaysia. Somehow the school obtained a real live turkey. For two months, this turkey was kept in the middle of the playground, in a pen constructed of wood and chicken wire. It became something of a school pet. But there came the day when it was gone, only to reappear on our dinner plates. I remember my mixed emotions: there was the novelty of eating turkey for the first time, but also the realization of where it had come from. For sixteen years, that remained my only experience of Thanksgiving.

But I did not grow up deprived of feasts. I grew up as a missionary kid in Thailand, where feasting is an important part of life, as it is in most so-called traditional societies. We were surrounded by wedding feasts, funeral feasts, feasts marking the entrance of a son into the Buddhist monastery, feasts for earning merit in the Buddhist system, and so on. The major feast that we participated in was held each Christmas, when the staff of the mission hospital in the small town would arrange a huge feast for all the hospital staff and their families. I still have far better memories of that Thai food than of any turkey I've ever eaten.

Though feasting no longer plays the important role in the West that it does in more "primitive" societies, the tradition of the feast survives at Thanksgiving. Hours are spent in the kitchen preparing the meal. The table is set in festive array. Families gather and we all sit down to a long, leisurely meal.

This message is the last in our series examining the spirituality of daily life. John Hanneman began the series for us with three messages on the parable of the prodigal son, a parable which concludes with a feast. Indeed John entitled the second of his messages "Joining the Party," and invited us to take communion as a sign of doing just that. To draw this series to a close and to mark Thanksgiving, I thought it appropriate to speak on the topic of feasting, and to once again invite you to feast at the communion table.

I take my initial text from a section of Scripture that I feel is too little known. We are familiar with the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 20, but most people don't know the context in which those commandments are set. I will be looking at the first eleven verses of chapter 24, but before we start on that chapter it is important that we note the setting.

The book of Exodus opens with the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. God instructed Moses to confront Pharaoh with the demand, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me." Six times Moses challenged Pharaoh with those words (7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Though God was moved to compassion by the suffering of his people, it was not primarily to make them happy that God delivered them. God saves us not to give us health, wealth and prosperity, but to make us his worshipers. This is the same thing that Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well: "a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father

seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24).

Having delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, the Lord brought them on a three-month journey through the wilderness, to Mount Sinai. Exodus 19:1 records their arrival at Sinai. There they camped in front of the mountain, and prepared to meet their God. Then occurred one of the most awesome scenes in the whole of Scripture, as described in Exod 19:16-19,

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. (Exod 19:16-19, NIV)

Astounding though the physical events were, it was the theological event that was the most astonishing. God had come down to earth to meet with an entire nation. Prior to this, God had occasionally revealed himself to individuals, but this revelation to an entire people was a major new development in the progress of redemption. Fellowship had been re-established between God and humanity. It is against this backdrop of restored fellowship that God then gives the Ten Commandments, in 20:1-17, followed by the case laws of chapters 21-23.

Though the Lord had brought his people to worship him, he could only be worshipped from afar. Though God had come down to earth, he was not fully accessible to the people. Indeed the people were so terrified that they wanted to maintain their distance. Atop the mountain was a holy God. At the base of the mountain was an unholy people. The two could not meet face-to-face, so Moses engaged in an ancient form of shuttle diplomacy, moving back and forth between the two parties. In chapter 19, he made three round trips up and down the mountain. After the Ten Commandments were given, Moses approached the thick darkness where God was (20:21), while the people remained at a distance. From within this cloud God addressed Moses, giving him the laws recorded in chapters 21-23.

Now we are ready to read chapter 24.

Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him." (Exod 24:1-2)

After the Lord has finished giving the laws, he summons Moses to come up the mountain and to bring with him some of the Israelite leaders. He is to bring his brother Aaron, and Aaron's two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu. He is also to

bring seventy of the elders, the number seventy indicating that they are representative of the whole. This party is to come part-way up the mountain, and there, at a distance, worship the Lord, while Moses alone approaches the Lord.

But before Moses can come up the mountain he must go back to the people to fetch the leaders. Verse 3,

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (24:3-8)

Moses returns to the people and recites for them what the Lord has told him from out of the thick darkness. He writes these words down in a scroll, described in verse seven as the Book of the Covenant. This scroll later becomes Exodus 20:22-23:33. The people are confident that they can do everything which God commands them. But the best intentions of the people are not sufficient to seal the covenant between God and mankind. For the covenant to be ratified it is necessary that blood be shed.

Accordingly, Moses rises early and builds an altar, surrounded by twelve stone pillars, representing the tribes of Israel. Since the priesthood has not yet been established, he summons young men to make sacrificial offerings to the Lord. Moses collects the blood from all these animals, gathers it in bowls, and then sprinkles it upon both the altar and the people, proclaiming, "This is the blood of the covenant." This act of sprinkling the sacrificial blood seals the covenant, which is really a peace treaty between God and his people. Note that it is the blood, not the people's pledge of obedience, that makes the treaty.

Now that the covenant between God and his people has been solemnized, the leaders are able to venture up the mountain. Verse 9,

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (24:9-11)

These are extraordinary verses, among the most extraordinary verses in the entire Old Testament. The first extraordinary thing is that these seventy-four people saw God. You might ask how this is possible, since just a few chapters later the Lord tells Moses, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod 33:20). On that occasion, Moses was privileged with seeing the back of God (33:23). Here in 24:10, presumably the leaders did not see the face of God. Indeed it seems they saw only his feet.

How do you describe the indescribable? These leaders

were confronted with that problem. The nearest they could come to describing God is describing the pavement under his feet. It looked something like sapphire, blue as the sky on the clearest blue day. When Ezekiel had a vision of God, he described "what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome" (Ezek 1:22), and above this expanse was "what looked like a throne of sapphire" (1:26). When John, the author of Revelation, had a vision into heaven, he saw before the throne "what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal" (Rev 4:6). Such are the attempts of men to describe the overwhelming radiance of God's presence.

We would expect that when the Israelite leaders are confronted with this radiance, they would be overwhelmed and fall down in worship. This was the response of Moses (Exod 34:8), of Isaiah (Isa 6:5), of Ezekiel (Ezek 1:28), of the creatures whom John saw around the throne (Rev 4:10; 5:8, 14). But here in Exodus 24:11, the leaders do not do that. Instead of falling down to worship, they sit down to a meal. This is even more extraordinary than them seeing God. The meal that they enjoyed was a fellowship meal in God's presence, a meal which sealed the covenant in an even more profound way than did the blood thrown upon the altar and upon the people.

Let's pause awhile and consider the act of eating. We live in an age that strives for ever greater efficiency and productivity. Yet eating is inefficient. The food we eat has to be raised and then processed. Once inside us it has to be broken down in our alimentary canal until it's in a form that the body can ingest. How much more efficient it would be if the scientists would develop a set of pills that gave us everything we would need. Think of all the land that would become available if none were needed for the growing of crops or the raising of livestock. Think of all the illnesses and diseases that would be prevented. But the great majority of us rebel against this vision of life. Astronauts eat in a highly efficient manner, taking their food from tubes, but for all the sophistication of NASA's food scientists, what every astronaut craves is "real food" such as pizza.

There is something more to eating than just providing our bodies with the nourishment they need to keep functioning. Eating a meal is a metaphor for something more profound. To cite an example familiar here in Silicon Valley, at a "power lunch," the actual consumption of food is of minimal significance.

The metaphor of eating begins in Eden. When God created Adam, he placed him in the garden and told him he could freely eat of the great variety of trees. Only one tree was forbidden. With the bounty of the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had all the food they needed. Furthermore, since this was God's garden in which he walked in the cool of the day, they ate in the presence of the Lord. But once they ate of the one forbidden fruit they were expelled from this feast and subjected to eating their food in sorrow. Because they transgressed in the realm of eating, God afflicted them in the realm of eating:

"Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Gen 3:17-19)

Though this curse is punishment, it also establishes a long-

ing for the day when we will once again sit down to a banquet that is not provided through our painful toil but through the beneficence of God, a banquet which is eaten in the presence of the Lord.

This is the banquet to which these seventy-four leaders sit down part-way up Mount Sinai. God solemnizes his reconciliation to humanity by having these leaders eat a meal in his presence. Now at this point the rest of the people are at the foot of the mountain, eating their manna, which in itself is not the fruit of their own toil, but bread from heaven. But God will presently extend to the whole nation this invitation to eat in his presence.

In Deuteronomy, the Lord through Moses gives the Israelites extensive instructions on the subject of feasting. In chapter 16, he instructs the Israelites on how to celebrate the three major festivals in the Israelite calendar, the festivals of Passover, Weeks (later called Pentecost), and Tabernacles. For each of these three festivals the Israelites were to come to the place the Lord would choose as a dwelling for his name, later identified as Jerusalem. There they were to offer their sacrifices, and then eat and rejoice in the presence of the Lord. The Lord is emphatic that eating and rejoicing in his presence is the climactic element of these festivals.

In chapters 12 and 14, the Lord gives instructions on what the Israelites are to do with their tithes and free will offerings. Reading for example from chapter 14,

Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice. And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own. (Deut 14:22-27)

Does that alter your understanding of life for the Israelites in the Old Testament? God redeemed the Israelites from slavery so that they might worship him and have major parties in his presence. From any utilitarian or pragmatic point of view, the use of the tithe for feasting was a complete waste. The money could have built such majestic buildings and run such impressive programs. But, no, every year the Israelites were to blow the whole lot on a party. And they were to ensure that the Levites, who had no income of their own, could join the party.

Here at PBC Cupertino, we operate in what most churches would consider an inadequate facility. Our auditorium is so small that we now have to have three services. We have an inadequate parking lot. We rent an office suite a mile away because we don't have any office space here. There would be certain advantages to having a larger, more modern facility. But the elders consider it far more important that your tithes be spent on people than on buildings. This commitment, plus the fact that we don't carry any debt on this facility, allows us to employ more pastors—those modern-day Levites with no income of their own—than would be normal for a church this size. It allows us to operate a need fund so that we can re-

spond to the needs of the family and ensure that we all participate in the party.

It is against this backdrop of eating and rejoicing in the presence of God that we should read the stories of Jesus' table fellowship. A large percentage of the stories about Jesus and of the stories that he told concern food and eating. Jesus scandalized the religious leaders of the day by his choice of dinner companions. Indeed, one commentator on Luke has remarked that Jesus was killed because of the way he ate.¹

Earlier in the service, we read the account of the dinner party that Levi, also called Matthew, threw for Jesus (Mark 2:13-22). As a tax collector, Matthew would have been hated by most Jews as a collaborator with the Romans and as a man who profited from the misfortune of others. Yet Jesus accepted Matthew's invitation to a dinner party in his house. Furthermore, he had the disciples come as well. Most of these disciples were fishermen and they would have known Matthew as that despicable fellow sitting at the tax booth between Bethsaida and Capernaum, extorting money from his fellow countrymen. Imagine how these disciples felt when Jesus told them that they were all going to dinner at Matthew's house.

By having table fellowship with Matthew and his tax collector buddies, Jesus was making some strong statements. He was telling these sinners that they were welcome to eat and rejoice in the presence of God. He was telling his disciples to welcome Matthew as an equal. And he was telling the religious leaders that even tax collectors and sinners, nay, especially tax collectors and sinners, were welcome at the Messianic banquet foretold by Isaiah, who wrote,

**On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines. (Isa 25:6)**

Meanwhile, these religious leaders stood outside watching and working themselves into a frenzy over the complete lack of decorum. But that is just the point. The Christian life is not a life of decorum. It is not about having your act together, about washing your hands the right way, eating the right food, and having the right dinner guests. At the heart of the gospel lies the scandalous invitation extended to sinners to come and dine at God's table.

When missionaries first went into central Thailand in 1952, there were no Christians in the whole region. My parents arrived there soon afterwards: my mother in 1954, my father in 1955. For several years, my mother helped run leprosy clinics. The missionaries would go to a village, set up under a tree, and invite lepers to come and have their wounds treated. In those days, leprosy was a dreaded disease, and lepers were cast out of their villages. As the missionaries touched these lepers whom no one else would touch, they told them the gospel stories, the stories of Jesus touching lepers, and dining with outcasts. In central Thailand, two churches came into being: a so-called "leprosy" church, and a "well" church.

For many years when I was a child, my father taught a residential Bible school for these "leprosy" Christians. Numerically, the "leprosy" church was stronger than the "well" church, and spiritually, it was much stronger. Physically, the "leprosy" Christians were not well, but they had much greater spiritual vitality than the "well" Christians, so much so that for many years the "leprosy" church resisted encouragement to unite with the "well" church for fear that their spiritual vitality would be diluted. What led the two churches to finally unite, in the early 1980s, was the realization that the children of the "leprosy" Christians were "well" children. Even today,

the leader of the Central Thailand Association of Churches is one of those “leprosy” Christians who responded to the news that lepers are welcome at God’s banquet table.

Spread before us here we have a banquet table. Every year at Passover, the Israelites feasted and rejoiced in the presence of God. Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, but he transformed it by giving it new significance. When God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt, he brought them to a mountain where he made a covenant with them and invited the leaders to sit down to a meal in his presence. God has delivered us from bondage, and has brought us to a mountain, as described in Hebrews 12,

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:18-24)

We have been sprinkled with the blood of the covenant and are invited to sit down to a fellowship meal in God’s presence. The food we eat has been provided by God himself: it is nothing less than the body and blood of his dear Son.

It is not a cocktail party that God invites you to. At a cocktail party, people mill around, eating finger food and engaging in small talk. If you’re an introvert like me, it’s easy to feel left out. Cocktail parties are not kind to the little people. We watch as others gather around the exciting people, the extroverts who are “the life and soul of the party.” If we manage to strike up a conversation with someone, we catch them glancing over our shoulder to see if there’s someone more interesting to talk with. Maybe you approach the Christian life like a cocktail party: it’s all right until something more exciting comes along. If this is your attitude, then you will never appreciate the Lord’s table for the extraordinary thing that it is.

It is to a dinner party that God invites you. A host invites you to a dinner party because he wants you. In his marvelous book, *The Supper of the Lamb*, Robert Farrar Capon writes of the dinner party,

it is an honest attempt to create a company, not a crowd. Persons matter at the table. We sit in real and estimable places marked with the most precious and intimate device we have: our names. Harry sits next to Martha not because he wandered to her side out of whim or loneliness but because, in his host’s loving regard, he is Harry and she is Martha, and that is where they belong ... assignment to place by name is the host’s announcement that he cares... To ask a man to break bread with you is to extend friendship, to proclaim in love that you want not his, but him.²

In February, I threw a surprise fortieth birthday party for a friend. His wife suggested that we go to a restaurant, but I

wanted to throw a dinner party at home so that we could enjoy table fellowship in an unhurried manner, free from the many distractions of a restaurant. Eddie came in the mid-afternoon, ostensibly so I could help him with his laptop computer. As we worked away in my study, the dinner guests quietly arrived in the living room. When we emerged from the study, the surprise was complete. Nine of us sat down to dinner, and spent three hours around the table. We feasted on food and on stories, but, above all, we celebrated Eddie’s very being. By inviting you to his table, God celebrates your being.

But there is still more to this feast. The Lord’s Supper is but a picture of the real feast that will take place in the future. Here’s Capon again,

For all its greatness...the created order cries out for further greatness still. The most splendid dinner, the most exquisite food, the most gratifying company, arouse more appetites than they satisfy. They do not slake man’s thirst for being; they whet it beyond all bounds... This is the inconsolable heartburn, the lifelong disquietude of having been made in the image of God.³

God invites you to feast at this table until he brings you to feast at the table spread for celebrating your marriage to his dear Son. We were made for more than this earth. Thanksgiving dinner and each other dinner feast to which we sit down is a declaration of the extravagance of being, of the fact that eating is about much more than just nutrition. It is about celebration and welcome, of being accepted for who one is. This meal to which we are about to sit down may not seem like much. Symbols are like that if you can’t see the reality to which they point. Take the symbols, eat and drink, and see this as the extravagant act it is: a feast at God’s banquet table.

**O God, you are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.**
(Psalm 63:1-5)

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1. R. J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 70; quoted in Jerome H. Neyrey, “Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. J. H. Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 361.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* (New York: Smithmark, 1996 [1967]), 170, 172.

3. Capon, *Supper*, 188-190.