

A Family-style Dinner

[Text -Luke 22:14-23]

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From time to time, I'll go to a restaurant and see a sign on the wall or on the front of a menu which says: "We treat you like family." In spite of that, I will usually stay there and eat! As some of you know, some of the fundamentalist Christians in my extended family don't treat me very well. Having an openly gay, liberal United Church of Christ *pastor* as a family member, is really hard for them to accept! [Of course dealing with their judgmental attitude, hasn't been a rainbow-colored picnic for me either!]

Fortunately, though, there is still one setting in which we can all gather to share good memories, and to try to find new points of mutual understanding. That place is the *dinner table*. Whether it's a holiday, a wedding, or a special birthday, we come together to share abundant food; funny or memorable stories from the past; and a tangible recognition that we are still family. For me, these gatherings also contain the hope that - some day - my being gay will finally be recognized as a natural and *positive* part of who I am; rather than some dark defect that lessens my worth as a person, and negates my calling as a pastor.

Throughout history, every major culture and religion has honored the practice of *hospitality*. This involves more than simply gathering with like-minded family and friends. It emphasizes the welcoming of the *stranger*, the *refugee*, the *outsider* - and offering them food and sustenance, shelter and sanctuary. In its essential form, Holy Communion is the practice of *radical hospitality*! It's about celebrating a Life - and a Love - which transcends culture and prejudice; race, and religion; betrayal, denial, and even death! Jesus offers the first "Holy Communion" to a group of *Jewish* people, including a couple of guys named Judas and Peter - both of whom are about to betray him! This group has absolutely no idea what Jesus is talking about, when he calls the bread his body, and the wine his blood. He says to them, "Take and eat - this is for you!" So they take it and pass it around the table, sharing it with one another; trusting that Jesus' love for them is strong enough to overcome any doubts or confusion, fear or failings that they might have.

This morning, and every time you and I celebrate Holy Communion, we are confirming *our* trust that the love which Jesus embodies and reveals is still strong enough to overcome any doubts or confusion, fears or failings that we might have! It's also a reminder that we can never treat Communion as exclusively "ours"; but must recognize that every person in this world is a loved and cherished Child of the Holy One, and is worthy and welcome to come to the Table!

Jesus offers *Communion* as a sign of our *Common-Union* - our unbreakable bond with him, with our One Sacred Source, and with the entire Human Family. This is why we at Brecksville United Church of Christ always extend a specific and sincere invitation to *all* those who are present, to partake of the Bread and Cup. We celebrate a Faith which celebrates the interconnectedness of *all* our lives - regardless of one's faith tradition, personal background, or current condition. And it's a Faith which shows us, that to truly honor the "*Body of Christ*" means more than simply being concerned about people's spiritual well-being. It also includes caring for their *bodies'* physical needs. It's a Faith that calls us to help provide for *all* our neighbors in need, just like Jesus does!

Jesus doesn't just talk about feeding the hungry, he does it! He doesn't preach about universal health care for the poor, he actually practices it! He not only believes in the abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace, he faithfully shares that abundance with every person he encounters. Jesus proclaims the *Good News*: that though our tendency is to fearfully push-away those people we perceive as being different or defective, the *Divine Desire* is to lovingly gather us all around the Table as One Human Family.

So this morning, as we eat and drink together - up here, or downstairs - you and I not only remember the love which Jesus embodies; we are also empowered to *re-member* the Body of Christ: to graciously welcome all God's children who have been denigrated, cut-off and tossed-aside; and to lovingly help them re-connect. For even though this may be a simple "meal" that we share, because we do *share* it with all who desire, it represents so much more!

It connects us to all our sisters and brothers throughout the world, and throughout time.

It links us to the ancient Hebrew Passover Story, and sets us free from our *own* slavery to fear and bigotry, self-centeredness and narrow-mindedness. It awakens within us that age-old practice of extending gracious hospitality to everyone we encounter.

And it opens our minds and our hearts to a glorious Divine vision, where *all* are welcome to gather around the Table, and to share in that Great Feast which is still to come - an eclectic, abundant meal, where being treated as *family* is a really good thing!