

"WHY WE GATHER AT THE TABLE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

One of those majestic cathedrals in northern Europe was known for its magnificent organ. However, unlike the electronic organs of today, these "ancient" organs depended on a man who would pump by hand the air needed for the organ to produce its great sound.

A guest organist was scheduled to play a Sunday afternoon recital featuring the works of Mozart and Mendelssohn. This brilliant guest organist bowed before the crowd and said,

"For my first selection I will play a piece by Mozart"

And with that brief announcement, he sat at the organ and began to press the keys but absolutely no sound came out. He attempted a second time but again to no avail. This time, very aggravated and annoyed, he said in a loud voice,

"For my first selection I will play a piece by Mozart!"

He returned to the keyboard, but still no sound. Suddenly he heard a voice from behind the organ, loud and clear, say, "If you don't say 'WE', I ain't gonna pump". With that the organist smiled and said,

"For OUR first selection WE will play a piece by Mozart".

And then great music was heard by all in that majestic cathedral. I believe the Church of Jesus Christ always plays its best music when we realize that it is "WE" and not "I". Perhaps this is why our Lord, Jesus Christ, put a table - THE LORD'S TABLE - at the center of our faith. Let's think about it...

COMMUNITY OF FAITH

For one thing, the table teaches us that we are a community of faith. We gather here like a family assembled to break bread. At HIS table we are one!

Back in the summer of 1966 a Boy Scout Troop, en route to their New Mexico destination, stopped at the Sequoia National Park in northern California. One of the guides shared a valuable insight with the boys...telling them that you will never find a Sequoia tree in isolation. Sequoias only survive by being close to each other. Despite the very large size to which they grow, they have very shallow roots. They survive because the root system of each tree is interwoven and connected to those of its neighbor. This is where their strength comes from. When fierce winds come, the trees literally depend on one another to stand. No rugged individualism here. Community is the answer.

One of the continuing threats to the Christian community is a fierce individualism that prevents at times the unity of purpose. It seems we are each so very different and unique. We all tend to go our own way. We're so busy with our own agendas. We are isolated from one another.

Many of us are caught up in the "mind-set" of the ME generation. So many neighborhoods are only 27 inches wide....occupied by one person - ourselves. When we come together at Christ's table, we are reminded that we are a community.

COMMON HUNGER

As we come to His table, we are also reminded of our common hunger. That is what we do at a table, is it not? We satisfy our hunger.

Jesus knew that the greatest human hunger, beyond all other hungers and human desires, is the deep-seated hunger for meaning..for God. And when we deny that hunger or attempt to satisfy it with false and empty substitutes, we wind up with a deadly self-righteousness and something beautiful begins to die within us. Christ knew that there is a hunger in the soul that only the bread of heaven can satisfy.

Shortly before his death, tennis great Arthur Ashe wrote these beautiful words to his daughter, Camera. He said,

"Camera...have faith in God. Do not be tempted whether by pleasures and material possessions, or by the claims of science and smart thinkers, into believing that religion is obsolete, that the worship of God is somehow beneath you.

Spiritual nourishment is as important as physical nourishment and intellectual nourishment. Do not beg God for favors. Instead, ask God for the wisdom to know what is right, what God wants done, and the will to do it. Know the Bible. Read the Psalms and the Sermon on the Mount, and everything else in that timeless book.

You will find consolation for your darkest hours. You will find inscribed there the meaning of life and the way you should live. You will grow into a deeper understanding of life's meanings".

Arthur Ashe was right. Spiritual nourishment is as important as physical nourishment. The Lord's Supper reminds us of that truth and then provides the nourishment. The Lord's Table reminds us, first, that we are a community and that we all share a common hunger for meaning...for God.

COMMON HOPE

God has come into our midst in the life and love of Christ. Through Him, our sins have been forgiven and there is a second chance for us. Yes, as Paul reminds us, all things are possible.

Donghua Li was a prominent gymnast in his country of China. We're told that he left his family at a young age in order to enter the Chinese athletic machine and his only dream in life was to compete in the world Olympics and that seemed to be his destiny until the day came when he fell in love with a young Swiss woman named Esperanza Friedli. When Dong's coach forced him to chose between gymnastics or his growing relationship to Esperanza, Dong chose Esperanza. He moved to Switzerland and gave up his place on the Chinese Olympic team.

His decision forced him to miss competing in the 1992 Olympics, but he set his sights on representing Switzerland in the 1996 games. Life in Switzerland was easy. He and Esperanza were married.

The government of China gave financial support to its athletes, so they had the finest equipment and facilities that money could buy at their disposal. The athletic facilities in Switzerland couldn't even begin to compare. But Donghua trained obsessively anyway. And although people respected his skill, Dong knew they didn't have a great deal of confidence in his winning the olympics.

By the time of the 1996 Olympics, he would be 29 years old...way past the prime of most Olympians. Few people believed he could compete against the younger world athletes, but Esperanza cheered Dong on every step of the way. When he felt most hopeless, he knew he could turn to her for encouragement. It is appropriate to note that Esperanza's name means "hope". The day before he was to compete in the '96 Olympics, Dong came down with a raging case of tonsillitis, but his coach, knowing how much Dong wanted to compete, lied to him and told him it was just a simple cold. The next day Donghua Li won a gold medal for the Swiss team in the '96 Olympics.

Friend....when we gather at the Lord's Table, we are reminded that there is ONE who cheers us on in the greater game of life. We are reminded that we are a people of hope.

As you know, the Lord's Supper had its origins in the Jewish Passover - the remembrance of the Night that God sent death upon the first-born of all the Egyptians households, but "passed over" the households whose doorposts were covered by the blood of the lamb. It was this incident that long ago led to the Israelites gaining their freedom from slavery in Egypt. The Passover tradition begins with the youngest child in the family asking the father, "Why is this night different from other nights?" And this is the father's cue to begin telling the Passover Story.

When our Jewish friends eat this meal at Passover, they celebrate their freedom from the bondage of Egypt and the new opportunities for life that have been given them. When we partake of the bread and the cup, we also think of freedom - of the freedom that Christ gives us from the bondage to sin, to guilt and to death. We are a people of hope because of what Christ has done for us.

COMMON FAITH Community. Hunger. Hope. And finally, we come to the table because of our common faith. This table reminds us all that we belong to Him. It reminds us that despite the fact that we gather as different people from different backgrounds - male and female, young and old, rich and poor - through the shed blood of Christ, we are united in a common faith.

Remember, brothers and sisters in the faith...this is the joyful feast of the people of God. We come from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South and we gather in these moments around the table of our Lord. Come - not because you must, but because you may. Come - not to show that you are righteous, but to ask for God's help. Come - not to debate a proposition, but to seek a presence.

The word "sacrament" comes from the Latin word "sacramentum", which originally referred to the oath of allegiance to the Emperor taken by a Roman soldier. And whenever we receive the Lord's Supper, we are repeating an oath of allegiance to Jesus - our Emperor. We are not here tending a dead tradition. We are paying homage to a Living Lord!

CLOSING

So, why do we gather at the Table of our Lord? Because we are a community of faith, sharing a common hunger for meaning and for God. There we find a common hope because we are linked together by a common faith in the life and the love of Jesus.

PRAYER