

“Tisch”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Exodus 12:1-13; 13:1-8 & Luke 22:14-20
October 7, 2018
World Communion Sunday

There is a part of a Jewish wedding called the *tisch*. It occurs just before the ceremony and, traditionally it’s for the groom and the other men — though nowadays in more progressive settings a bride might have a *tisch* of her own, or the *tisch* will be for everyone.

The *tisch* is a bit of a raucous reception with those invited toasting and singing and offering blessings. It’s customary for the groom to attempt to deliver a learned discourse to share wisdom with the family and friends. I say “attempt to deliver” because shortly after he starts, he’ll be interrupted by his friends, drowning him out with singing and rhythmic clapping to make him stop — so he won’t make a dope of himself trying to impart wisdom to anyone on this special day. Finally, the *ketubah* — the traditional marriage contract — is reviewed by the rabbi.

All this singing and rejoicing *before* the actual ceremony seems like a great idea to me. How bold and confident and fun and what a perfect preparation for making sacred vows. But I’ve failed to mention one important thing: *tisch* isn’t Yiddish for “contract” or “blessing” or “toast” or “singing” or “pre-game.”

The word “tisch” means “table.” All this celebration happens around a table laden with food and drink. The table is at the center, and if you reduce the entire party to one word, it is *tisch*.

Our third reading comes from the Gospel according to Luke:

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.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

This we do in remembrance of him. For us, the Lord’s Supper is the sign and seal of our communion with the crucified and risen Christ. Jesus was so often found at a table, sharing common suppers and miraculous feasts and Passover dinners. He was so often found breaking bread with those with whom he disagreed and with those with whom it was unseemly for him to break bread and with all who would invite him to eat. He spoke of himself as the bread of life and the true vine. The communion meal we share is a feast of thanksgiving — and the Greek word for that is *eucharist*. It connects us with God’s saving power and providential care from generation to generation. It is a sacrifice of praise. It is gracious invitation to everlasting covenant. It is a call to feed others as we have been fed. It is a foretaste of a heavenly *tisch* where God will wipe away every tear.

It is a direct response to Jesus's prescription to "do this in remembrance of me." It is a memorial banquet at which we remember suffering and death and resurrection. It is bread and cup, body and blood, signs of a new covenant.

Jesus and his disciples were celebrating Passover that night, and their meal was in response to what God told Moses and Aaron: "You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'"

When we last saw Moses, he was being informed by God that despite his protests, he would be helping God lead the people up out of Egypt — where they were suffering under an economy in which the food was produced on the backs of the poor but the fruits of the labor were nearly exclusively enjoyed by the very wealthy. They would head into the wilderness, where they'd find a very different economy — one in which they would learn to trust God and have faith abundance and put aside scarcity and fear. ¹

And so it's almost go-time for escaping and God gives instructions that work beyond the intellectual. God could have said "I don't care how or what you eat, the point is to get out of here!" Instead, with specifics and cooking and baking come the heat of the fire and the feel of the bread and the aromas of the roasting and the sounds of the preparation and the taste of it all and now you have got a memory that sticks.

You remember God's fidelity to the people who were blessed to be a blessing but who were prevented from blessing others by the whips of Pharaoh. You remember, and your children remember, and it goes through the generations, as sharing the Passover meal means participating in and rehearsing God's story of deliverance. At the table, God's work to bring liberation so that the creation may thrive and life may abound and new stories may emerge — that work is remembered and proclaimed.

It's been said that telling the Passover story is an antidote to nostalgia and an inoculation against cruelty. Going back to Egypt is tempting for the Israelites pretty quickly after getting into the wilderness. Telling this story sets the record straight on just how bad things were. Don't long for yesteryear, which wasn't as glorious as you remember. And stand on the side of life-giving freedom, not death-harnessing oppression.

Each week you are invited to the *tisch* in this house of worship. And World Communion Sunday is special, because on one day, *tischen* around the world are open for the celebration on the same day. Today, the *tisch* truly stretches beyond our walls and our denominational boundaries and our theological squabbles and our cultural misunderstandings.

Today, we agree to let go of the nostalgia for times that were less free. Today we agree to stop harming one another, just for a few minutes, so that we can proclaim to our children that this world is more than a deeply broken political system and yelling and ugliness. We proclaim that if you look for them, there are feasts happening around us. Suffering is persistent and wounds are real and it can feel as though Pharaoh and Caesar will prevail. But there are celebrations to be had and parties that you can try to crash, except you can't crash because it turns out you're invited, and there is always bread — amazing grace, indeed, there is always bread!

¹ Ellen Davis: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/food-faith/2010/06/18/manna-economy/>

God is working through wonderful people who are seeking to make room at kitchen tables and board room tables and congressional tables and all sorts of other tables for those who have been told that those tables aren't for them. And God is working through others to make the tables that exist bigger and through others who are creating new tables and through still others who are setting up clandestine tables for those who hunger but can't safely come to any of the other tables. I spent some time this week with the Director of the Magic City Acceptance Center, where tables get flipped to protect teenagers whose families would harm them if they knew the sacred truth. The next day I listened in awe as a teacher I know cleared the table to make sure a kid who is struggling with gender identity heard loud and clear that they are beloved.

The Rev. Dr. John Buchanan was pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago when I was a seminary student. To my twenty-something eyes and ears, he was a kind old dude who was impossibly out of touch. But he really knew how to tell a story.

While spending a summer in Scotland, he met a pastor from a small village who told him a communion story he'd never forget. The man was an infantryman in the British army during the Second World War and he ended up in a POW camp in Poland. It was awful — freezing cold with a single bowl of thin soup and a small hunk of bread for sustenance each day. Starvation, illness, and filth were everywhere. The men were desperate. They contemplated the option of bolting for the edge of the camp and jumping on the barbed wire fence, inviting shots from the guards that would end the misery.

Late one night the future Church of Scotland pastor quietly crept near the fence to consider suicide-by-Nazi. He suddenly heard movement from outside the fence that turned out to be a Polish farmer. The farmer slipped his hand through the fence and handed the prisoner half of a potato. Through a thick accent he whispered, in English, "The Body of Christ."²

Do this in remembrance of me.

Outside these walls every single thing seems mean-spirited and poisonous right now.
Thanks be to God for blessings and songs that interrupt the not-quite-wise.
Thanks be to God for celebrations that persist even in the harshest environments — even when Pharaoh's heart is hardened, even when betrayal will lead to death.
Thanks be to God for miraculous, bounteous feasts — for bread that rises and cups that overflow.
Thanks be to God for reminding us to come to the welcome table.
Amen.

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-09/shared-meal>