



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Children of God”

I John 3: 1-3

I Corinthians 11: 23-26, 33

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I John 3:1-3. ¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

I Corinthians 11:23-26, 33. ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

What is your favorite family meal? Not just one of the three meals you may get to eat each day, but the favorite meal you share maybe just once a year. Maybe it’s Christmas Eve dinner, with the house decorated and gifts still under the tree. Maybe it’s the Easter lunch you look forward to, with deviled eggs on the table and something sweet for dessert. Or perhaps it’s a birthday dinner, where someone makes your favorite foods or you take yourself out to your favorite restaurant.



Think about it for a moment, what is your very most favorite meal. Who eats it with you? What makes that meal so special?

For me, growing up, it was our Thanksgiving meal. My cousins and aunts and uncles would travel into town and we'd all converge upon my grandmother's house. It was exciting to drive up to the big, old house, and know the inside would be full of good smells, familiar stories, and lots of laughter. My brother and I idolized older cousins who would greet us and take us out back to throw the football. We'd eat this special meal around the dining room table or kids' table and linger into the afternoon, full and comfortable and happy.

Ever since my cousin Will passed away, his mother, my aunt, always makes sure we have his favorite Thanksgiving dish, pineapple casserole. We always have rice—because, South Carolina—and the gravy has turkey giblets and chopped hardboiled eggs mixed in it—my husband Chris says that's weird, but no one remembers why we make it that way, we just always have. My mom brings pecan pie, because it's my brother's favorite, and every year we all say we should make less food because there's just too much left over—but, truthfully, everyone loves the leftovers.

It's a meal I look forward to, perhaps in part because of the menu, but actually, not really because of the menu. It's a meal I look forward to because of the people I've gotten to share it with over the years—some who are always at the table, some who are now eating with in-laws, and others still who have passed on before us.

During the height of the pandemic, we didn't gather in such a large group. We gathered as smaller family groups, like I bet most of you did. We didn't have the same grand smorgasbord of various casseroles, but we still ate well and reminisced on old family stories—like the time my Aunt Nelle's dog stole the turkey from the dining room table, or the way Aunt Dru makes the gravy when she won't ever eat it, or my Nana's old dishwasher that you used to have to pull away from the wall and over to the sink to hook it up with a hose.

These memories have stuck with me. And I know the meals we share around our own table will be ones our daughter will remember. It brings me joy to share those stories, those people, and that special, joyful meal with her. That's my favorite family meal.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, when Jesus sat around that Passover table with his friends, he was sharing a family meal. He took food that was familiar to them—each item on their plates told a story. And then after dinner, with his words and his actions, he gave the most basic and simplest of foods—bread and wine—*new* meaning. Years later, his disciples would remember that night, and they would strive to recreate it.

The earliest Christians met in homes to worship. And when they worshiped, it would start around a dining table. They'd share a meal, reminisce on old stories, welcome new family to the table, and then they'd break the bread and pour the cup, using the same words Jesus shared the night before he died.



I imagine in some years and in some places, the crowd around the table was great. And other years, in other cities, the crowd would have been small, perhaps even a meal shared in secret. But what's the same in all these settings would have been the stories that were told—of Jesus and his love—and the food that was shared—bread and cup; body and blood. That special meal was the church's family meal. And at that table, all were welcome, regardless of gender, race, age, ability, or ethnicity. All were called beloved children of God.

But as we know, children don't always get along. Things weren't perfect in the early church. The Jesus movement fragmented early and often. James and John asked Jesus for positions of glory. The disciples argued about who was the greatest. The Greek-speaking Jews complained about the Aramaic-speaking Jews because their widows were being overlooked in "the daily distribution of food."

About twenty years later, Paul lamented the deep divisions at Corinth. Earlier in I Corinthians 11, Paul criticizes the people for coming "together as a church" only to exhibit the divisions present in their gatherings (I Corinthians 11:18). But what really irks Paul is that divisions would be present even during Jesus' mandated celebration of the Lord's Supper, which was meant to be a unifying commemoration of the Body of Christ. As a remedy to their divisions, Paul briefly outlines the tradition of the Lord's Supper (what we read in I Corinthians 11), reminding and highlighting to them the meals past, this holy meal's meaning for the present, and its hope for the future.

This meal Paul outlines is what would hold them together.

It's not hard for us to imagine that in the early 1930's, the world was a divided place. In the throes of the Great Depression, social class division was real. Tensions in Europe were mounting as powers shifted in Germany in the wake of WWI. It was a tenuous time, and many Americans, in particular, found it hard to look after the needs of their neighbors when their own needs may have seemed so great.

In 1930, a Presbyterian pastor named Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr served as the moderator of General Assembly. In that year of service to the larger church, Dr. Kerr first had the idea of something we now know as World Communion Sunday. Three years later, he started the practice at his congregation, Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA, and invited other churches of all denominations to join them. World Communion Sunday was an attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—"in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another."ⁱ

Reflecting on the idea, Dr. Kerr's son says, "The concept spread very slowly at the start. People did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ."ⁱⁱ



Here we are in 2023. We are divided still. Children of God haven't changed all that much in some 2,000 years. Some children of God hold to seven sacraments, while others, like us, hold to two (baptism and communion). Some children of God ordain women, while some won't let women lead anyone over the age of 12. Some children of God picket pride parades, while others give out free hugs to teens and grownups who were rejected by their own parents. Some children of God take the Bible literally, while others believe it to be inspired and interpret it through the lens of its time. Some children of God sit in Congress—on the right and the left and somewhere in between.

Jesus must have known it would be in our nature to tear ourselves apart. Jesus must have known we'd need reminders that with all our differences and all our division, we are still his. And so he used ordinary things all around us—water, wine, bread—to call us back to our senses. To call us back to who we are. To remind us that we need him, we need saving from ourselves, we need to be fed, forgiven, restored, and made new.

Many of you may remember Maundy Thursday in early April 2020. Things were awful then. We couldn't be together. We couldn't celebrate Jesus' Last Supper in the same room. And so we broadcast it out into your homes. And we believed, we knew that the Spirit was with us, uniting us, connecting us—whether we were across the street, across town, or across the country.

As Presbyterians, we believe in and celebrate something we call the Extended Table. This Table is wide. It is so wide that it reaches beyond these walls, beyond this neighborhood. It's not even a Presbyterian table. It's the Lord's Table. And today we celebrate the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we remember that Christians in other churches, in other lands, in other languages say these same words the Apostle Paul gave us. They break the bread—that may look like ours or not at all like ours—and they share the cup—that may be big and fancy or small and simple. Those details don't matter. What matters is that it is one Table, one body, one blood.

Later today, our elders will take communion to our members who may be watching online right now in their apartment, memory care room, nursing home bed, or their home of many years. For a myriad of reasons, they can't come to this Table, so we extend the Table to them. And in so doing, we remember the Lord's Table is wide and it is welcome, and it is for you—you of much faith, and you of little.

And we trust that one day, we will all be gathered at Christ's banquet Table. And these divisions that are right now so real will fall away. The veil will be lifted from our warring madness, and we will sit at table with our Lord Jesus. May we be reminded—this is the Lord's Table, and our Savior invites all who trust in him to share the feast which he has prepared.

The benediction comes from Jane Wilson Joyce's poem *Crazy Quilt*.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia



is cracked. California is splitting
off. There is no East or West, no rhyme,
no reason to it. We are scattered.
Dear Lord, lest we all be somewhere
else, patch this work. Quilt us
together, feather-stitching piece
by piece our tag-ends of living,
our individual scraps of love.

ⁱ <https://www.shadysidepres.org/about-world-communion-sunday/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.shadysidepres.org/about-world-communion-sunday/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jayne Wilson Joyce, "Crazy Quilt," *Quilt Pieces*, second printing (Gnomon Press: 2009).

