

To start out with, I'd like you all to think about the special times you have had dinner with friends, friends you love, and that includes family.

Maybe it was Thanksgiving, with all the traditional food, at a relative's house, even with the good china and silverware. Or maybe you were still at the “kid's table.”

Maybe it was going out for pizza, with everyone talking, and laughing, and getting his or her fill of such good food.

Maybe it was a picnic, or a barbecue, or even a church potluck dinner.

At all good dinners there are these two important parts: food and fellowship. The food nourishes our bodies; the fellowship nourishes our souls.

Of course, the most famous dinner of all is the one we are commemorating today, Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples.

And boy is it famous! We have the painting by Leonardo DaVinci. I went looking and we have one of those paintings hanging in the hall, one in the Cook Room, a crocheted picture of it in the lounge, and this one carved into our altar. My husband is always saying that that is the best picture for our church, because we are so good at food and fellowship!

The Last Supper was a holiday meal, the Passover meal. In the Jewish faith, the Passover was to celebrate the Angel of Death passing over (that is not stopping at) the homes of the Israelites, as they prepared to escape from slavery in Egypt.

It's a meal with a very specific menu, with each food item full of historical and religious meaning. It's a meal that took some doing.

So, Jesus had arranged for a room where he could eat this meal with his friends, the twelve disciples. He sent Peter and John to get the room and the meal ready.

Now, cleanliness was and is a very important part of the Jewish religion. It is an important part of a meal—we want to eat in a reasonably clean place, with clean dishes and utensils and hands.

In our meal of Holy Communion, cleanliness is important, too. Besides the literal, actual cleanliness—the clean dishes and cloths, the pure food elements, the hands prepared with hand sanitizer—we have even more cleanliness. We have the washing and cleansing of our hearts and souls.

We get this by confessing our sins and asking for forgiveness, which God grants us. We do this in the prayers and silence before we receive the elements of bread and juice.

These are important and real prayers, not to be muttered mindlessly, but to be prayed and taken seriously.

One of our oldest Communion services has this prayer of invitation to Communion:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins,
and are in love and charity with your neighbors,
and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God,
and walking from henceforth in his holy ways:
Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort,
and make your humble confession to almighty God.

Don't get confused about this. It doesn't mean that we must be perfect before we can receive Communion. Who would be able to do that? In fact, in the Methodist church, we

think of it the opposite way. We consider Communion to be a “converting ordinance,” which means it is something that can cleanse our souls and bring us closer to God.

Another thing about a meal with our friends is that everyone is included. We don’t get together with a group of people, and give everyone there a plate except one. Of course not.

Neither did Jesus. He had dinner with all twelve of his disciples, even Judas, the one Jesus knew was planning to and did betray him.

That would have been hard for me! But Jesus was the best of hosts, and he didn’t leave anyone out—no one is ever left out, with Jesus. Everyone is welcome to be Jesus’ friend. He always holds out that hope.

As we partake in Holy Communion, we try to be like that, too. We want everyone to have a part in this holy meal. We don’t rule out someone as too young, or too old, or not a member of this church. If there is difficulty in walking or kneeling, we work around that. We want everyone to feel welcome, and receive the blessing of this sacrament.

That is not to say that we intend to pressure anyone. It’s more like an open, eager, and welcoming invitation.

Then there is the menu itself. No, we don’t have a full Passover dinner, or a full dinner. This is more like a symbolic meal, with pretty small portions.

Some churches use real wine, like in Jesus’ day. We use grape juice. We use grape juice because Mr. Welch, a good Methodist, invented the process that allows grape juice to keep, and not turn to vinegar or wine or just rot. That way children and invalids, and those with alcohol issues can have Communion like everyone else. That gets back to the “everyone welcome” part.

We have bread, and I try to give everyone a generous piece. I don’t want anyone to get the idea that God is stingy. And we try to use bread that tastes good—not those wafer things or the crumbly stuff that looks like Chiclets gum. My church used that when I was little. You didn’t look forward to that!

We don’t want anyone to think God is a lousy cook. According to a novel, The Shack, God is a great cook! Actually, I read somewhere else that heaven smells like bread, or maybe it was “like bread baking.” That’s a wonderful smell! I know it is because my house smells that way this morning, because my husband baked some bread.

Then, we need to consider what a meal does for us. It feeds us. It feeds and nourishes our bodies. In a way, it’s like gasoline for our cars—food is our fuel, so we can go and work and play and serve God and other people.

It’s wonderful that God created us this way. We need food. We eat it and enjoy it. We feel better. Then we have energy to go about our lives. That is how God set it up.

Words are involved in our meals with friends. There are the conversations and jokes that help us keep up with each other. There are also words like, “Let’s eat!” and “Here, eat this, you’ll feel better.”

With Jesus, the words were very special and holy. Jesus was comparing the elements of bread and wine to himself, his body and his blood. Most of us may be used to those words, but to his disciples and anyone hearing them for the first time, those words are shocking.

Since I have been a minister, I have seen more than one child wrinkle his or her nose on hearing them. You could almost see what they were thinking: “Body? Blood? I thought we were getting bread and juice.”

That's all right. It's good for us to remember that Jesus did sacrifice himself, his life, so that our souls might be cleansed and fed and renewed and refreshed. Jesus' self-sacrifice brings us forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

So, today, on World Communion Sunday, with Christians all around the world, we are partaking in the sacrament of Holy Communion. We are having dinner with our friends, as Jesus did.

We are remembering Jesus, and all that he did for us.

We are "feeding on him in our hearts," as the old prayer goes, so that we will be given strength for the days to come.

We are receiving Jesus himself, a goodness to fill us up, all the way.

We are Jesus' friends, we are friends with one another.

And we are going to have dinner.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)