

Return to the Table

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Holy Week - Return to the Lord / Lord's Supper; Forgiveness; Invite; Table Fellowship / Exodus 24:3-11; Psalm 116:12-19; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; Mark 14:12-26

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our King. Amen.

It's been a long day and really a long day at work already and it's only Tuesday. You stop by your mailbox to grab the mail. You see the usual stuff: the credit card bill and the utility bill, a credit card offer, a flyer for the furniture sale in Rice Lake. You even pull off the add for the lawn care service that they hung on the outside of your mailbox. You are thinking...nothing exciting yet again today.

That's when you spot it. Something different. Something special. "It's not my birthday," you think. It's an oversized envelope with a wax seal on the flap. Heavy paper with the address inscribed in flowing calligraphy. Stunningly beautiful, exuding luxury and prestige. There is no return address, but you can tell this is something special. This is a special invitation.

Without waiting to get in the house, you crack the seal and open the envelope. Inside as an engraved invitation to join the Queen of England for a special banquet. Your travel arrangements have already been made. All expenses are covered, and you will travel first class. Before you can even consider what you have in the closet for such an event, you note that a gown, shoes, and accessories will be provided for you. You need only to show up.

When you call your boss to see if you can have a few days off, you're stunned to discover that your employer has already been notified and arrangements have been made to cover your responsibilities while you are away. Every detail has been attended to. A few hour later, you're on a plane winging your way across the Atlantic.

When you arrive, you are whisked to a luxurious suite, where you have a little bit of downtime to prepare for this amazing honor. You're a little unsure, but a quick check of the invitation confirms that yes, that is indeed your name and address, so it actually must be for you.

You shower and dress in the dazzling white gown that has been laid out in your room, and then you follow the instructions that were given, explaining where to find the table. As you enter the room, you are surprised to find that you are not the only guest. The hostess has invited many people, from all walks of life, and everyone gathers around the table to take their seats. Small conversations pop up as people get to know one another, and common interests are discovered. There is great joy in the banquet hall.

Everyone here admires the Queen and is overjoyed to be in her presence. The assembled group is full of kind, loving people, and all are made to feel that they are part of the group.

As the night goes on, though, arguments pop up here and there. One person is angry that his neighbor took so much of the gravy for his potatoes that she didn't get any. Another pair begins to argue about whether the crystal in use is the best choice for such an event. Someone accidentally steps on another person's toes, and a yelling match ensues. One guy in the back has had little too much wine and proceeds to try and belch the alphabet, much to the embarrassment of his table-mates. Another woman turns to her neighbor to point out someone who is using the wrong fork on the salad.

As you look around the gathering, you may even begin to wonder if you belong here. The meal is sumptuous, the environment is luxurious. You doubt if this could possibly be meant for you. What in the world could you have done to deserve such a gift? How could you ever repay such generosity?

Now that you've conjured up the whole scene in your mind, let's shift a few details and tie it to our Gospel for today.

The invitation is not from the Queen of England. It's from someone far more important. The invitation is actually from the "Lord Jesus Christ, the only

begotten Son of God,” the One “by whom all things were made.” The King of Kings.

The venue is not some ritzy palace in Great Britain; it is the sanctuary of this very church. The table is no mahogany beauty, but it is the humble rail that stands before the altar. And the group of people who have been invited is, well, everyone around you---fellow members of this congregation but also visitors from other congregations and the whole sainted host of heaven and earth, who come together for this foretaste of the feast to come.

We gather together today, and thank God we can this year, in response to an invitation that Christ has extended....Return to the Table; Return to the fellowship that you are a part of as members of the Body of Christ; Return to the Joyous Communion that we share with one another. In fact, Christ extends this invitation, not just tonight, but again and again, week after week, as He draws you to His Table to feed you and strengthen you and nourish your faith.

This feast is joyous. A year ago when we were merely gathered together virtually for Maundy Thursday it was difficult. It was less than ideal. It was odd not receiving the Lord’s gifts on that night...this year...we do. We can, we are able. Oh and those months that we didn’t commune together how hard was that. I missed the supper. I missed the gifts it brings. Now today as he already has been doing he invites you to come back...to return to the Table for the very real gifts in this joyous a feast.

It is an exceedingly joyous feast, but it doesn’t take long to recognize that it is also marred by sin. We, you and I, are the chosen of God, but we also possess a sinful nature that infects everything. We sit at the Table with the same people who we disagree with politically. The parents whose kids you might believe are a distraction. The man who smells a little funny. The woman who sings off-key. The friend who failed to keep your secret last month and betrayed you to a mutual acquaintance. The member you had an argument with over something so minute you don’t even remember, but yet it still bothers you. Oh, and don’t forget, the pastor who sins just as much as you do, and maybe offended you at any point in the last year.

You may even wonder if you should really be here. At the Last Supper, Jesus revealed that one of His disciples would betray Him, and it rippled through the whole group. “Is it I?” each wondered in turn. “Am I that messed up that I would do something like that?”

You may wander. You may doubt. But Christ has drawn you here, and He serves the banquet up all the same. He offers not just a “feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined.” No, it’s much, much more than that. He offers you His own body and His own blood. He offers forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in this Holy Meal, as Luther explains in his explanation of the Sacrament in his Small Catechism: “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

This Meal takes away your faults. This Meal binds you more closely to your brothers and sisters in Christ and, more important, to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This Meal covers your sins, strengthens your faith, and nourishes your body to serve God and to serve your neighbors.

You belong here, dear Saint, because Christ has won your seat at the Table. Your baptism is the personalized invitation, and Christ’s death and resurrection is the wax seal that authenticates it.

No one can claim that you do not belong, because your seal is guaranteed in Christ. He has promised it, and His promises are trustworthy and true.

We rejoice in all that Christ gives us in the Meal we will share. We give thanks for His grace that invites us to His Table, joins us in fellowship with one another, removes our sins, and strengthens and nourishes us for service.

And as amazing as this Meal is...never forget that this is merely a foretaste of what God has in store for you. This bit of bread and this sip of wine is just a teaser for the sumptuous feast we will one day share when all the saints of God come together for this wedding feast of the Lamb in His Kingdom, which has no end. We live in the crazy “now but not yet.” A time when we receive the benefits and the gifts that God has for us today, right now. But we also know that what we experience now cannot hold a candle to what will be on the Last Day. Today’s gifts sustain us and build up our confidence in the feast to come.

May you rejoice in the gift of Holy Communion, which we share together today, and hold fast to the promise of the full feast to come.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

- › May the God of peace which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.
Amen