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Matthew 26:26-28
GOD HIMSELF INVITES US TO A VERY SPECIAL SUPPER

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It has been said that there are two kinds of people. There are those who eat to live and there are those who live to eat. I know that I fall into the latter category. Whenever we go on a trip, I start planning the meals. I know the places that we have gone to in the past and I know the ones that we have definitely enjoyed. I check to see what new restaurants are in the area and which ones are best for breakfast, for lunch and for supper. I know which ones I like for steak, for fish, for pizza and for burgers. I make mental notes of them for future reference. I always enjoyed an invitation from a local funeral home every year at Christmas. It was a nine-course dinner and the invitation read: "Please arrive hungry!" I think that I did.

I think that there are two things that make meals very memorable. The first is what we eat. I'm sure that you can remember some of the best food you've ever had, whether that's your mother's or your wife's home cooking or a certain restaurant. The second memorable thing is who we eat that meal with. It might have simply been a cup of coffee or a burger at McDonald's, but it was special. It might have been the first meal that you had with your future spouse or it might be the last meal that you shared with your mother or father. If you were invited to a special meal with the President of the United States or some famous movie star or athlete, we probably wouldn't miss it for anything. What if God himself invited you to supper? How would you feel about it? Would you be excited, or would you do everything in your power to make some lame excuse to get out of it? Well, God has invited us to a very special supper. It is for you and for me and for a world of sinners. Let's look at his meal that we call the Lord's Supper.

Jesus and his disciples came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This was the most important festival of the year. Pilgrims would come from all over the world for this festival. It commemorated the Israelites' departure from slavery in Egypt. God showed his power, his love, and his deliverance. The people were to celebrate it every year with a very special meal. Families were to assemble together. They would eat roasted lamb, reminding them that the blood of the lamb saved them from death. They would eat unleavened bread, reminding them that they were to eat this meal in haste. Salvation was at hand. They would leave Egypt the very next day. They were to eat bitter herbs, reminding them of the many years of bondage they endured in Egypt. They were to drink wine, reminding them that this was a celebration of God's mercy.

The disciples would be familiar with these elements of the Passover meal. Children were taught to learn what those things meant when families ate together. No doubt Jesus would explain the meaning of those things to his disciples in a very meaningful way. But there was something very different about this Passover. This was the last Passover Jesus would eat with his disciples. In fact, it was the last Passover that they would celebrate at all. They would still celebrate the blood of the lamb that delivered them from slavery. But it would be a different lamb. It would be the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ himself. Yes, in less than 24 hours, Jesus would be dead. He would go to the cross on Good Friday and offer up his life for the sin of the world. He would suffer God's wrath upon our sins and take away God's wrath forever. Jesus knew that was going to happen.

The Passover would be fulfilled by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Jesus would fulfill the Old Testament and institute his New Testament. This was his will for his people at all times and in all places. He would do something that might sound very strange to his disciples. "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them,

saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Yes, this was something new. Jesus declared the bread to be his body and he declared the cup to be his blood. This special meal has been called a number of things. It is called the Lord's Supper, reminding us that it is a meal where we eat or drink. Yet it is not just any meal. It is the meal our Lord himself has given to his Church. Jesus celebrated many meals with his disciples. This was the one meal that he would give for his Church to repeat over and over again until he returns. This meal is also called the Sacrament of the Altar, reminding us that it is received at the altar where we are forgiven by the blood of the Lamb. The Scriptures clearly tell us that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. They also tell us that the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. It is also called Holy Communion. We see that there is a joining together of the bread and the body of Christ, a joining together of the cup and the blood of Christ. There is also a fellowship that we have with Christ and with one another as we come together. Finally, it is called the Eucharist. That comes from the Greek word *eucharisteo*, meaning to give thanks. We give thanks to God for this gracious gift.

In this meal we eat bread and drink wine. Yet as we eat and drink these things in a natural way, we also receive Jesus' body and blood in a supernatural way. This is a great mystery. We cannot understand it. We simply take Jesus at his word. Many people refuse to do just that. They say that Jesus couldn't possibly be present in the Sacrament. Therefore, the bread and the wine must simply symbolize or represent the body and blood of the Lord.

Jesus means what he says, and he says what he means. He says, "This is my body. This is my blood." We don't have to understand it. We can't. We can't understand it any more than we can understand how God can be three Persons and yet one God or how Jesus can be both God and man in one person or how God could bring the universe into being simply by speaking his creative Word. It is a miracle. We leave it at that. We simply believe that Jesus is truly present in this Sacrament. All who partake of this Sacrament receive Christ's body and blood.

Why did Jesus give this Sacrament? He gave this sacrament to assure his people that their sins are forgiven. He does this in a very personal way. In the Sacrament he comes to each of us individually. I asked you how you would feel if you were invited to supper by a very famous celebrity. You aren't going to get any higher than this. God himself invites you to his supper. In this supper, it isn't merely that you are in the same room with this celebrity along with 10,000 other people and that you never really get to see this person. In addition, that person has absolutely no idea of who you are and probably doesn't care. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus speaks to you and me personally. The one who knows us by name and knows even the number of hairs on our head takes the time to tell you, "Your sins are forgiven."

Now how important is that? Hopefully, very important, since all of us are sinners who sin against God and our fellow man every day of our lives. We hurt others by what we say and do. But there are also things that are hidden from others: our inmost thoughts and desires. We may be able to keep them hidden from other people, but we can't hide them from ourselves and certainly not from God who knows all things. We should be ashamed and rightly so. In the Sacrament Christ comes and assures us of forgiveness. We remember that he does not come to excuse sin, pretending that it never happened or that it's no big deal. He came to forgive sin. There is a big difference. He would give his body and shed his blood into death to forgive our sins. In the Lord's Supper he comes to us and assures us that our sins have been removed completely, drowned into the depths of the sea, removed as far as the east is from the west. The promise is assured because this is his body and his blood.

Yes, he comes to me individually and assures me of that fact. In the Lord's Supper I am assured of how much I mean to Jesus. Even if I were the only sinner on the face of the earth, he still would have gone through everything for me. We cannot appreciate the true nature of forgiveness until we understand how damning sin really is. The more we see our sins, the more we will appreciate this very special meal.

We will want to come to this meal often because Christ invites us to come. Even if there were no benefit connected with the supper whatsoever, we should still go simply to honor the Savior who invited us. But there are benefits connected with the Supper, many of them. It is a Means of Grace in which God offers, assures, imparts, and seals to us the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. These benefits are not merely symbolized in the Sacrament, they are given.

Let's face it. Our faith will often become weak. We pray, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." God's promises are always certain. When our faith weakens, they become uncertain to us. Is there any one of us who does not need his faith strengthened and often as we live in a world hostile to Christianity? The Sacrament restores peace to our consciences. Guilty consciences make our lives miserable. There is no cure for a guilty conscience other than the forgiveness of sins.

The Lord's Supper helps us to lead a godly life. When our sins are forgiven, we strive to love God and our fellow man. We strive to forgive our neighbor so that we might be like Christ. The Lord's Supper reminds us that we are a family. We love one another despite our differences. We look for comfort. As Christ's people, we too are asked to take up our cross and follow our Savior. The Lord's Supper gives us the patience and strength to bear our cross as our faith is strengthened.

We are finally reminded that this world is not our true home. We are only strangers and foreigners here on earth. Our true home is in heaven. The Lord's Supper is a foretaste of that eternal feast. We join together with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. The Lord's Supper joins us with our loved ones who have gone before us into heaven. What a joy and privilege we have!

God himself has invited us to a very special meal this evening. It is a meal that he has given to his Church to celebrate until Christ comes again in glory. You and I have been invited by God himself. He repeats that invitation over and over again. How could we possibly say, "NO?" Come for all things are now ready! AMEN.