

Today as we come around the Table, we ponder the Holy Spirit's role in gathering us for supper; the supper the greater church has come to call "The Great Thanksgiving".

I have learned to appreciate the Presbyterian emphasis on God's initiative.

Our understanding is that it is the Spirit of God who calls; who invites; who gathers us for worship.

It is the Spirit of God who awakens us from the stupor of our busyness and collects us for a moment of rest and refreshment around the Table. The Holy Spirit sweeps us together from the 4 winds: from factories and fields; from tractors and bus trips; from things as anxiety producing as medical procedures to those as mundane as mowing lawn and moving toys from floor to basket, floor to basket, floor to basket.

Like children at play we often forget we need to eat. Yet suddenly when the dinner bell rings we run in anticipation of being filled. Surely the Holy Spirit smiles and greets us as we come for supper.

It seems to me there are 7 movements associated with Table:

- Preparation of the meal
- Calling folks for supper
- Washing up
- Gathering round
- Giving Thanks
- Eating
- Praising

Preparation of the meal was made through the life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a potluck. There is nothing we can add to it. It is complete, whole, ready for our consumption.

Calling folks to the table, as I said, is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is an ongoing task surely done in joyful anticipation that one day the Table will be bursting with the glad presence of the children of God.

Washing up for supper is something we would just as soon skip.

Often the cook reminds us to stop at the sink or the cistern before coming to the table

Generally we are hungry enough to comply with this command, even when we don't agree that a little dirt is a problem.

I think it is fair to say that the Bible offers two different images when it comes to washing up.

In one image we participate in the scrubbing, though it is God who provides the cleansing or purifying agent.

In the other image, God is solely responsible for the washing. Like a little infant or toddler, we simply endure the process of being scrubbed, like it or not.

In I John 1:9 we are told "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The fourth step is "gathering round". There are two images of coming to table that come to my mind:

One is carrying a tray in the school cafeteria and scoping it out: "Who looks friendly enough or at least safe enough to eat with today?"

The other is of workers coming in from harvest and filling the table without a thought of who they are sitting next to, but simply focusing on the fact that we are all here together to be filled and refreshed.

As guests of Jesus, we get to participate in the latter picture while offering the hesitant stranger in the former picture a hearty welcome to come along and sit with us.

The fifth movement is “giving thanks”. You have heard communion called “The Eucharist” which is the Greek word for “Thanksgiving”. So important is this movement, that historically the church has called the whole service of communion

“The Great Thanksgiving”.

When I was migrating to the Presbyterians, one of the interview questions was something like this: “Do you have an understanding of ‘The Great Thanksgiving’”? I mumbled something about knowing that Presbyterians hold the bread and the cup as sacraments; that the grace of God somehow comes to us through taking the elements. Fortunately, the interviewer did not press me further, because it was only within the last couple of weeks that I actually understood the structure used in preparing “The Great Thanksgiving”. When I read some of the work of Thom Shuman, I had an “aha moment”.

I invite you to turn to page 9 of your Glory to God hymnals. Not the 9<sup>th</sup> hymn, but the 9<sup>th</sup> page before the hymns begin. And now open your bulletins to the page that is titled “The Great Thanksgiving”.

Interestingly, The Great Thanksgiving begins with a dialog; a conversation. I am not sure why I am surprised by this. When you come to a table, don’t you immediately begin chatting with the other persons at the table?

The chatter of The Great Thanksgiving includes a mutual blessing:

*The LORD be with you. And also with you.*

Then a word of encouragement and help.

*Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the LORD.*

**We** lift them. On any given Sunday, there are people gathered who are without strength to lift anything, let alone something as heavy as their hearts.

But because we do not come to the Table alone, we can assist one another in lifting the hearts of the people of God.

*“Let us give thanks to the LORD our God”*

Why?

Because **“It is right to give thanks and praise”**.

But why is it right?

The next portion of The Great Thanksgiving outlines the why:

Why?

Because God created the world

Why?

Because God sent prophets to call us back to God

Why?

Because despite our sin, God remains steadfastly devoted to us.

Why?

Because Christ was given to us

Apparently with that revelation, all of heaven sings! The service pauses from the litany of God’s story and instead turns to God’s character. In a little while, we here in Tontogany will be singing Holy, Holy, Holy. As we sing, we do so with the angels and the saints, with the cherubim’s and seraphim’s, with the children of God around the world, some, who at the very same moment will also be singing praises which reach to heaven along with ours.

Following that holy pause, we return to God’s story of love:

We could say something as simple as

*God came to us as the baby Jesus.*

*Jesus grew and taught and healed and delivered and fed and forgave the people*

*Jesus died and rose and ascended.*

*Jesus is coming again.*

Usually it is offered with a little more poetic flare than that and with a few of our weaknesses thrown in for good measure.

And just in case we missed a few points, The Great Thanksgiving pauses again and together we declare:

**Christ died**

**Christ is risen**

**Christ is coming again.**

Finally,

we seek the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit;  
the Spirit who brings us oneness, faithfulness, hope

If the LORD's prayer has not been previously spoken, it may be offered next.

All of that for the movement of "Giving thanks".

And now for the eating:

When you see a feast spread before you, do you ever pause to say, "Remember the time we were at Grandma's and she served beef roast with mashed potatoes and gravy and creamed peas and wilted endive with hot bacon dressing and homemade dinner rolls with fresh strawberry jam?"

Doesn't the remembering make you want to eat and not only eat, but eat with grandma one more time?

So too, what we call so coldly and formally,  
"the words of institution"

are really words of remembering a previous meal;

they are words that draw us into the last time Jesus ate supper with his friends;

Remember the smell of the bread?

Remember its shape and texture and taste?

Remember the wine?

Its body and sweetness as it warmed your throat?

As often as you remember these things, remember me.

Eating and remembering are not two movements,  
but one.

Eating and communing with Jesus are not two movements, but one.

Eating and fellowship with the body of Christ are not two movements, but one.

Eating and being strengthened by the powerful grace of the Holy Spirit are not two movements, but one.

And finally what meal is complete without praising the host? I grew up with my dad ending a meal by offering compliments to my mother for the savory tastes that she set before us. Sometimes he would say, "We are going to have to kiss the cook for this supper."

On this past Friday evening we had supper with our friends Dan and Karen. We ate at the Mediterranean restaurant in Bowling Green called "Havana". There is no one I know who enjoys food more than Dan. His praise is profuse; it is detailed; and it is joyful;

it is honest; it is contagious.

He actually praises before the meal:

O this looks good"

and during the meal "this is seasoned just right:

and after the meal "we are going to need to come back here again".

O that our enthusiasm over the Table of Christ would be as abundantly infectious as Dan's expression of table praise.

Join me in the doxology.

Now may the Holy Spirit  
Who calls us for supper  
And sends us out filled with grace  
Unite you in mercy  
Strengthen you in love  
Satisfy you in joy  
And call you back again in  
Honor, delight, holiness and peace.