

LUKE 22:13b-19a, 25-30

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I admit, what I have on is not a tuxedo. But it is the closest thing to a tux that I had the nerve to wear. At any rate, you are supposed to be wondering, Why the formal dinner attire? Whom is that supposed to look like? Answer: it is supposed to remind you of the host at a supper party. And you know, of course, whose Supper you have come to party at this morning, who the host is.

If the officiating minister in a Christian liturgy ever needed a good reason to be nervous, then that is reason enough, namely, that in this liturgical drama the minister is cast in the role of our Lord himself. However, the minister is a sinner who with all the other sinners has come to make confession of his sin. Yet, since he is also officiating in that service as the minister, he must do double duty and absolve those sinners in the place of Jesus our Lord. The minister, being a sinner, has her own abject need to hear the preached Word of God's criticism and God's assurance for herself. Yet as minister she also has to preach that Word as though she, despite her unclean lips, were the voice of the holy God. Similarly it is my awesome duty this morning, as celebrant in the Lord's own supper, to play out the Lord's own action toward you. If you have trouble seeing past Bertram (as I do), I can only apologize for that and hope that at least the costume, and especially the words, might encourage you to see instead the Supper's original host and, seeing him, to experience his hospitality.

I.

In the Lukan account of Jesus' last Passover with the apostles nothing so conveys what a hospitable host he is as does the lavish menu he spread before them, and before you. But for that, too, you have to have a good eye to see it, a hungry eye. A hearty appetite helps one's perception of this meal. Else all you will see, despite his generous words to the contrary, is the simple, bland, unexciting, unleavened bread. Fishfood, really. And admittedly it is that, too. But I, as the pantomime host, am authorized to remind you that that seemingly tasteless bread is nothing less than our Lord's own Body. "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body.'" (v.19a)

It is as if some of the politer guests had just asked the host, as polite guests do, "And what, may we ask, is this particular dish?" To which the host replies, "This is my body." Now, if those guests are not only polite but already full and satisfied, what they may think (though, of course, they would try not to show that) is, "No, thank you, what need have we of someone else's body when we already have rather adequate bodies of our own?" Either you need the body he offers you, or you do not. If you do need his, because you really cannot make it with your own, then that already will do wonders for your appreciation of his mind-blowing menu.

In that case, you will not require some intricate exegesis of his offer. For that is what it plainly is, an offer more than a claim. He "gave it to them" says Luke. If you begin by trusting that what Christ gives, he gives because you need it and because he means you well, then that — that believer's hunger for the better body — will do more by far than any elaborate adjustments in your metaphysics. The alternative to his offer, it is only fair to remind you, is the same old annual diet of Passover lamb, which in the long run is as biodegradable and as terminal as you are. But it is clear from your presence at this Supper of his what your own preference is. Evidently you are prepared to trust this new, wild-promising last-of-the-big-spenders, this "benefactor" (as Luke calls him) who stakes his guests to a food which not even the neediest of them would ever have dared to wish for.

II.

On the other hand, there is also something about this extravagant host which seems not very host-like. In some respects, in fact, he acts like the kitchen help. To put it mildly, he looks like one of the waiters. Or to put it bluntly, as he does, he is merely a servant.

For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves, (v.27)

So, as the officiating minister at this Supper this morning — literally, as the officiating servant — I have to carry out that menial function of his as well, "as one who serves." Therefore, I should forewarn you that at the appropriate point in this meal I am going to have to put on the corresponding vestment of the servant: not a chasuble this morning, as some medieval monarch, but an apron, the trademark of the waiter.

I beg you, in advance, not to be offended by that incongruous attire. The intention is not to institute some new ceremonial rubric but simply to do what good liturgy always does, to communicate with real class the winsome secret of Christ our Lord — in this case, as that is captured in the Lukan Gospel. There, what distinguishes this host for his exquisite class, his elegant taste, is that he hosts his guests precisely by being their servant.

However, to play out this role of the servant consistently, I must do something even more incongruous than don an apron. I must not "sit at table" and eat and drink with the guests, though goodness knows how desperately I need that eating and drinking for my own sake. So, to make the point, the minister this morning will forego the pleasures of the table, the point being that Christ our host is "among you [not as one who sits at table but] as one who serves."

That is the most anguishing part of my role-playing, to have to abstain from the bread and the cup. Even for Jesus, who did not need the Passover himself, having to refrain from eating and drinking it with his guests was obviously distressing. You can catch that in his words.

"And he said to them, 'I have earnestly

desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, 'Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." (vv.15-18)

You also know how uneasy that makes you to sit at table and eat and drink as company when he meanwhile, the lord of the feast, stands and waits on you hand and foot. You want to protest, "Please, do sit down and join us." Or better yet, like Simon Peter: Lord, let us pitch in and help you. (v.33) It does require a special poise on your part to accept his lowly service gracefully without feeling terribly obligated to relieve him or repay him or maybe even, with some religious gesture, to tip him. Which would be the ultimate ingratitude.

Of course, what is most servant-like about this waiter-host is the lengths he has gone to in order to give you, and to break for you, the bread of his own body. Ordinarily no guest would expect that even from the most taken-for-granted waiter. Ordinarily no self-respecting guest would ever accept such drastic service. Still, neither can you afford not to accept it, once you have come to depend on such feasting for your very sanity and your lives. After that, who could stand to go back to the old Passovers and to mere unleavened bread? So what do you do except what he coaxes you to do, eat and drink at his expense and, above all, try to enjoy his services. No wonder he does not sit at table and eat this bread with you, for the bread in this case is his own body, broken and given for you. No wonder he hands you the cup and abstains from it himself. "You take this cup and divide it among yourselves," the happy cup of "the fruit of the vine." That cup can be yours to enjoy only because the cup which this Servant of yours insists upon drinking alone is the cup of suffering from his Father. (v.42)

III.

However, if that were all, then the Supper would not be nearly the fun it truly is. If all we ever had to look forward to at the party were to sit at table while he stands, and to eat the bread of his own body in which he does not share, and to drink the cup of joy when the cup for him is bitterness and death, then the Supper would be little more than an ambivalent wake with forced laughter and dutiful singing.

But the happy truth is, this present arrangement is only temporary, "necessary" (as Luke says repeatedly) but temporary. Our Lord's suffering, his abstaining from table fellowship, his slaving himself to death has been necessary only so that he might then be exalted. What this interim suffering and renunciation were necessary for was to enable him to ascend to the Father's right hand and eventually repossess under his own lordship

the lost ones — the lost coins and the stray sheep and the prodigal children — from their demonic possessors.

It is only a provisional necessity that this Supper be celebrated — as it is this morning and as it was that first time — in a rented upper room, which does not yet fully belong to Christ— just as his baby-manger was not his own. Throughout his ministry he had no place of his own to lay his head, and not even his own tomb. But all that is only temporary. It is just a matter of time, as he promised, before "you...who have continued with me in my trials...may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom." (vv.28-30) And all the inhabited world, the whole *oikumene* which Caesar Augustus had imagined was his though it really belonged to the Tempter, all that world — from Jerusalem to Rome to St. Louis — is now reverting to this servant-host who dared to so utterly lose his life as to gain it all back, and you with him as his winnings.

That is the coming great Supper Party which, by anticipation, gives this preliminary Supper this morning all its long-range fun and makes the singing swing and the wine taste good. And isn't it that heady prospect of you yourselves becoming co-hosts with him — white-ties and tails and fancy swirling gowns and all – which frees you up right now to put on your own servant aprons for one another and for the Lord's whole needy world?

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