

Waiting to Eat

BY TAYLOR SANDLIN

True community in the family of God requires that we wait on one another. Few things in worship help us learn that lesson like the practice of the Lord's Supper in all of its inefficiencies.

When I was growing up, my family rarely depended upon fast food for the evening meal. Usually my mother cooked. As the food began to make its way to the table, she would call us to come and eat. Once seated, getting to the food took some time. We would pass the various dishes from one person to the next, making sure everyone was served. After each member of the family had received their share of the evening's fare, we would bow our heads to say grace. Only after my father had said "Amen" could we begin to eat.

The slowness of the process frustrated me. I was a hungry young boy ready to eat. I did not grasp the value of waiting for others to be served. For me, mealtime was about the consumption of food. For my parents, mealtime served as an opportunity to shape their young boys into the kind of people who could function in polite society. Looking back, I recognize my mother and father were teaching us so much more.

At the table we learned to give and receive. At the table we learned to offer thanks for God's good gifts. At the table we learned how to ask for things we needed, but also, how to do so politely. At the table we learned to be patient with each other as we waited for our turn to take a piece of chicken. At the table we learned how to be kind to the person next to us, even if we would rather that person be someone else. At the table we learned what it means to be included and to include. In other words, at the table we learned to live together as a family.

The Lord's Table served the same purpose for the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 10, he references the Lord's Table when he calls the Christians in Corinth to live more faithful lives as the family of God. In the next chap-

ter, he turns his attention directly to their practice, or rather malpractice, of the Lord's meal. Paul was not at all happy with how the wealthy Christians in Corinth were observing the Lord's Supper. Indeed, he warns them, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat" (11:20). Problematically, when the Corinthians came together, they did not actually come together. They were divided primarily along socio-economic lines. The wealthy members started the service early in the evening before the poor members finished with work! When the poor finally arrived, they were limited to eating leftovers in the outer courtyard while the rich people continued to party inside.

Paul expresses his frustration with the Christians in Corinth by offering them a remedial course on the Lord's Supper. Recalling the events of the Last Supper, he writes that they have missed the point of Christ's meal. The Lord's Supper is not about self-indulgence or meeting one's individual needs. The Lord's Supper is a communal meal designed to shape the community. If the entire community is not included, it is not the Lord's Supper that a church eats. Paul's correction, "Wait for one another" (1 Corinthians 11:33), sounds like my mother's. Paul understood that the table serves as a practice run for the rest of life. If we cannot wait for each other there, we likely will not wait on or serve each other anywhere else.

Waiting on others has never been easy, but today it may be more difficult than ever. In a world of fast food and fast-paced families, the admonition to wait for one another seems farfetched. Meals are grabbed on the go. One child eats before football practice. Another eats after ballet. Life becomes about what is efficient, not necessarily about what is good. Individuals get fed, but the family does not.

Church families fall into the same trap. The practice of the Lord's Supper is anything but efficient. It does not seem to have the immediate effect of a clever sermon or emotion-stirring song. In a world that constantly boasts of faster, more efficient service, the Lord's Supper, when it is done well, remains excruciatingly slow. As a result, many congregations do not know what to do with it. Some observe it only rarely. Others tack it onto the end of a service and condense it into as short a time as possible. I know of one congregation that pushes it out of worship altogether: it offers a room outside of the worship center where individuals who wish to serve themselves Communion can do so at their leisure. Such a supper is efficient, but it is not the Lord's Supper that they eat. It is only the Lord's Supper if we eat it together as the people of God.

Christ commands us to eat together in remembrance of him for many reasons, but one of them is to remind us that the gospel he brings is not a gospel of efficiency. Christ's sacrifice unites us not only to God our Father, but also to one another as the family of God. Families are almost never efficient. True community requires that we wait on each other in worship and outside of it as well. Few things in Sunday morning worship help us learn

that lesson like the practice of the Lord's Supper in all of its inefficiencies. Services that are streamlined and efficient tempt me to focus on my desires without considering others. By slowing us down, the practice of the Lord's Supper invites us to consider our neighbor's needs as well as our own.

A member of my congregation reported her experience at a sister church. The deacons got a little confused while passing out the bread so that

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it was unclear if everyone had received a piece. The pastor, a patient soul, simply paused the proceedings and asked, "Has everyone been served? Do not worry about speaking up. We will wait for you to get the bread. We will not continue until everyone has been served." The waiting took several more minutes. The service came to a screeching halt. Because the organist had stopped playing, you could hear the

deacons shuffling around making sure everyone had a piece of bread. Everything became awkward and self-conscious, as though someone had hit the pause button on the worship service. At the same time, my church member said it was one of the most meaningful Lord's Suppers she had ever experienced. "The waiting on one another," she recalled, "felt right and holy. By the time we ate, we ate not as a collection of individuals, but as the family of God."

My friend shared this story with me, in part, because our church has made a concerted effort to observe the Lord's Supper more frequently. The move has not been an easy one. We have had our share of awkward moments. Serving several hundred people the bread and the cup takes time. Sometimes the service runs long. To date, though, I have not had a single complaint. I think that is because we are discovering some visions of God come only to those who wait.

I know that the waiting is good for my soul. As the pastor, I am used to being able to control the pace of the service; but once we begin the Lord's Supper, the service is largely out of my hands. I must wait on others to finish before the service can continue. Waiting on others helps me see those who are at the table with me. I see people like Erwin slowly making his way up to the front with his walker. The line builds up behind him, but no one seems to mind. We know that when he eats the bread and drinks the cup he is thinking of the day when he will eat this meal in the kingdom of God with Jesus, the saints, and his sweet wife Lena, who died last year. I see

Mary Kate who was baptized just last week. She is nervous about what to do. This is her first Communion. Her mom leans over and whispers in her ear. She eats the bread and cannot help but smile. I see Jan and Steve. I know they have been struggling in their marriage, but also know how much effort they are putting into working things out. I wait on each of them, wondering how the bread of reconciliation might nourish them this week.

One by one, the people of God take their turns. We wait on one another, patiently. Slowly, we are coming to understand, the table is more than a place we gather to eat the body of Christ. We gather here to be the body of Christ. To be the body of Christ takes time, so we wait, we see, we eat. We wait some more, and we are blessed.



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