



A COMMON MEAL - A SPECIAL HOST
John 13:31-35
I Peter 2:4-10

Recently, I read about a man who was walking by a used book store. He happened to look in the display window and a certain book, entitled **HOW TO HUG**, caught his eye. He was feeling a bit lonely and, being of a romantic nature, he thought to himself "**That's what I need.**" He went inside to look further, but to his dismay discovered that the book was the eleventh volume of an encyclopedia, covering the subjects "**How-Hug!**"

When a ministerial colleague read about that, he said, "**That is a lot like the local church.**" People come into a church with deep needs. They often feel lonely, discouraged and confused. They expect to find help, but instead are sometimes treated to an academic, theoretical treatise on love. They are looking for something much deeper and more profound than that. The Christianity they see looks more like a philosophy than a personal relationship with God.¹

How different that was from the family dinner table experiences that I knew growing up as a child or going to my **Aunt Kitty's** and **Uncle Ernest's** place for summer vacations in Virginia. Here **love and hugs** were real and personal.

My Aunt Kitty and Uncle Ernest lived in **Nokesville, Virginia**, outside of Manassas and that drive of 240 miles seemed like an eternity to me as a young child. From the **BIG CITY** to the **rural countryside** in just four hours.

If the surroundings were exciting to me, the meals were awesome. We ate mostly like country people from the garden, not the Acme. I always made sure I **sat next** to my Uncle Ernest. He would fill my plate with fresh corn on the cob, potatoes, tomatoes, green beans and he would fill my iced tea glass, which held a whole quart (32 ounces).

When we finished with our first plate-full, we would walk around the barn and come back and eat another plateful. Long before I ate at Shady Maple or Yoder's, this was my first smorgasbord. It was just a common meal for them. But my Uncle Ernest and Aunt Kitty were such special hosts. We felt so special. It was a special time when we all gathered together for the evening meal. They knew how to hug and love and eat.

Everybody needs a meal now and then that allows them to dress up, spruce up, and act "**special.**" It might be an evening that the children are away when you turn off the bright lights and light up the candles. It's like getting a hug from the inside.

Maybe it is going to the special eatery when you wear your best dress or best suit for that special person, for that **special magic moment**.

Meals like that make all of us feel more special than we really are. However, we all need to be special, even if such **specialness** falls quickly away on the ride back home or the walk back to the hotel room.

Our meal this morning is different than those just mentioned. As a matter of fact, it is exactly the opposite. We will gather for this supper as normal - average, run-of-the-mill, common people. And that is precisely where the significance of this sacrament is to be found. We do not come to this table acting like we are special. We depart from this table realizing - **we are called to be special**. We come as we are, but leave **commissioned** to be so much more.

We will come to this table as people who have spoken words that hurts - but we will depart from this table pledged to speaking words to HEAL.

Dr. Fred B. Craddock tells the story that illustrates the power of words to heal and help us to realize our identity and inheritance as children of GOD.

He tells of going back to his home in Tennessee for a vacation once and of sitting in a restaurant that overlooks the Smoky Mountains. The owner moved around the room, from table to table, visiting the guests of his establishment, asking if the food and the service were all right.

The owner, upon learning that Dr. Craddock was a minister, told the story of how he had grown up in these very mountains, and that he was born to a mother who **wasn't married** at the time. And since the town was filled with the kind of people who say that they forgive, **but won't forget**, there was a name that followed him every step he took. He felt as if he needed to apologize everywhere he went – including church.

One Sunday after worship, as he was leaving quickly as he always did to prevent any glances or caustic remarks thrown in his direction, the minister caught him by the arm and held on tight. **"Whose boy are you?"** The lad froze, fearing that he was about to be handed his biggest rejection.

And then, before he could open his mouth to answer, the preacher said, with a warm smile on his face, **"Wait a minute. I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God."** And with that he patted him on the shoulder, "Boy you've got a great inheritance; go and claim it now."

And the man shared how that one statement had literally changed his life. From then on he had more respect for himself, and demanded more from himself. From that moment on he traveled a different road, and his life took on a new dimension.

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked the man. And the man said, "Ben

Hooper." As he walked away, Fred Craddock remembered his grandfather telling him how the people of Tennessee had elected an **illegitimate child** to be the governor.

And after a little more reflection, he recalled the governor's name. It was **Ben Hooper**.

Oh, the power of a healing and encouraging word. It made him feel "so special" for the first time in his life.

That is why the Apostle Peter declares in I Peter 2:9-10 which we read today:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God - that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into wonderful light. Once you were not a people - but now you are the people of God." Wow! What encouraging words - look how special we are - we are the children of God.

From our gospel lesson today we see that Jesus shares a special meal with his disciples. The disciples were always competing to sit at the right or left hand of Jesus.

It was during that supper that Jesus said to them:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you...."

There in the midst of such a simple meal, those disciples realized that Christ expected so much more of them. Just as He loved them in spite of themselves, so also they were called to love others the very same way. As we eat this bread and drink from this cup we will remember that Christ's love took Him all the way to a cross. If we dare to love in as special a way as did He, the very same thing will happen to us.

We will know how to hug and love - biblical style.

And so, my sisters and brothers in Christ, I invite you to come. Approach this table, not pretending to be special, but depart from it seeking to live in a **special** way.

This **special meal** is God's way of caring for us after the Resurrection until that glorious day we meet our master face-to-face.

Until then, come as people who need Christ's love - in order to love in Christ's service. Today come and partake.

Accept forgiveness for your sins,

Strength in your weakness,

Courage for your convictions

Hope in your despair

When you have done that - you can leave here filled with new life and hope and a special love.

Because of this meal, you will be a changed person, a forgiven sinner, a new creation, a special child of God.

I hope everyone has had an Aunt Kitty or an Uncle Ernest in your life. If not, because of what Christ has done for you – **BE** an Aunt Kitty or Uncle Ernest to someone.

Most Wednesday nights for the past 3 years Eileen Voran, Denise Strick, and others have shared a meal with the youth of our church and community. They have taken a normal meal and made the youth feel special and wanted in an adult world. They have a place in the kingdom of God. It has been a joy to see it.

This meal is not a philosophy about love — it is real and personal. When the elements are given to you, the words are: **This is my Body broken for YOU — This is my Blood of the new covenant shed for YOU.**

This meal contains the power for us to love following the example that our Lord demonstrates by word and deed in this Holy Meal.

Let us go to the Holy Table – and meet again our special Host. He presides here.

Amen and Amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
June 7, 2009 Preached at both services
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PASTOR'S NOTE: There will be no sermon on 6/14/09 or 7/5/09 as Pastor Eric will not be preaching those Sundays.

ENDNOTES:

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1. **Thanks to Gary Vandaret of the Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California, for this story and insight.**