

It had been a lovely dinner. 8 very eclectic people, all very intriguing. The hosts, a wonderful couple, knew how to entertain with class, and had painstakingly prepared the right food and with perfect flair. Just the right wines – a new one for each course. It was heavenly....a repast for the gods.

As often happens at great dining events, lingering at table, the conversation turned to memory-making – and before long, the memory-making became REAL PRESENCE. She was a theology professor, born in Germany and educated in the United States. He was retired military, living out a leisure second career waiting for retirement. The conversation drifted to war and its weighty costs....“War is Hell,” he said. “Truly it is,” she responded, “but you have no idea how much hell, not having lived through one fought in your native land.”

The conversation deepened. “I was only 8 years old when the bombing started,” she said, “I didn’t understand. I couldn’t have – I was too young. The adults said that Hitler appeared to have done some very good things for our country. And suddenly, it seemed that the whole world was hating Germany and all Germans. It was so confusing...so mixed-up. I couldn’t understand.

“My father was killed when the bombs hit his factory. My mother – on the way home from the bakery to buy us some bread. Within 4 months, we were orphans – my brother, my sister, and me. It was very hard. We had relatives who took us in and raised us as best they could. But the war had devastated everybody....

“But the chasm left by the deaths of our parents seemed bottomless, and in truth, never completely healed. At age 20, I was invited by relatives in the United States to come to America to live and go to school....so I came.”

“In what German town did you live?” he asked.

“Dresden,” she replied.

“Dresden was leveled in the war,” he hauntingly replied.

“Yes it was,” she said, and a stony silence came over the once festive group.

After an awkward moment of silence, noticing the deathly pallor in his face, she asked: “Why did you ask where I lived?”

“Because I fought in the Second World War,” he said.

“In the Pacific or European Theatre?” she inquired.

“European,” he said.

“Part of the D-Day Invasion?” she asked?

“No, we came later,” he responded.

“And what branch of the service were you in?” she asked.

"The Air Force," he said.

"A pilot?" she asked.

"No, a bombardier," he replied.

"And what cities did you target?" she asked.

"Berlin, Dusseldorf, and.....Dresden," he replied.

The air became a solid mass....no one could breathe. And with the grace that only comes from LONG SUFFERING....HEALED....She took her glass of wine and raised it to him in a toast: "It has long been forgiven...long before we met....Like the Phoenix, rising from the ashes, we too shall arise." (origin of story unknown, given to me by a NORTH AMERICAN FORUM colleague in 1992)

Tonight, my friends, we gather at another table, where our host, Jesus Christ, has given us *His* very best – rich heavenly bread and finest choice wine. The bread so heavenly that we say it is Bread of Angels and His very Body. The wine so choice we call it the cup of salvation and His very Blood. And all of our sins have been long forgiven, long before we even realized. And like the Phoenix, rising from the ashes, we too are invited to arise.

For here at this table, all of the wars, the starvation, the violence, the brokenness, weariness and tiredness of our Coronavirus world are laid upon it. And here it is all gathered up into the arms of immortality, blessed, broken, forgiven and healed.

This night is about bread and wine, about bodies and blood, about feet and washing, about intimacy and unbounded, unexpected love and forgiveness, about a God who bends before us – bends before US! Mere creatures! – to wash our feet -- hoping that one day we will treat each other with the same regard and dignity that He has always lavished upon us. This is what the new covenant of love is all about. This is what worship is about. This is what reality and religion are about. This is what community and love are about. Everything forgiven. Phoenix rising. A new world being born.

And it is all there in this meal which is at the heart of our Catholic faith.

Second, some theologians say Jesus was killed because of the way he ate, whom He ate with, and what He encouraged them to do with one another as a sign of their allegiance to Him and His Kingdom. The Last Supper was but the culminating meal of a long series of meals that revealed who – and what – Jesus stood for.

How did Jesus get into so much trouble simply by eating? It has to do with WHAT Jesus laid on the table. And what He laid on the table was HIS DEATH. His Death for all to see, death ritually embodied in broken bread and poured out wine; death as human deed, restored and redeemed by the heart of God; death as the beginning of the world's transformation, blossoming from the body of Jesus, the One who dies and rises. Because Jesus laid death on the table, the table welcomes ALL human beings as equal partners in the Mystery of God. The only requirement for admission to the table is the freedom to be human – which is, ultimately, the freedom to die.

This was the outrageous scandal of Jesus' enacted parable at table. All anyone had to bring to it was the power to die. To die to unforgiveness, to die to selfishness, hate, stinginess, to die to lack of concern for the poor, the alien and the needy. For this dying of ours – wedded to the dying of HIS – is what makes the Phoenix rise from the ashes of our broken world.

This means equal partnership for all at the table – GOD’S table – and an end to privileged places, persons and perks. Here king and peasant, rich and poor, alien and citizen are all the same, all equal in the sight of God. This means that God can no longer be imagined as a distant Patriarch who underwrites the superiority of one country over another, of men over women, of clergy over laity, of rich over poor, of first world over third, of straight over gay, of white over black. This means that God’s ways are not our ways, that God’s name and nature is being redefined, that religious faith is being totally renegotiated and set upon a new footing. Indeed, as the Book of Revelations say: “Behold, the old order has passed away; now all is made new.” PHOENIX RISING!

Third, for many of Jesus’ associates, and for church people still today, such views were not only unimaginably brash, they constituted a prostitution of devout believers’ deepest understandings of God. To welcome outcasts to table-companionship in the name of the kingdom of God – in the name of a people’s supreme religious hopes – not only called traditional faith into question, it also “shattered the closed ranks of the community against the outsider.” Remember, the table established a group’s identity, prestige and membership boundaries. As in 1st century Palestine, so still in many countries and churches and homes yet today, we ONLY eat with those we CHOOSE to do so. We only want people in our church we like – and who are like us. We need to remember it is exactly THIS attitude that allowed Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to shake hands at the White House when they made their peace accord, but NOT to eat a meal together. For if they had eaten together, they would have entered a relationship – a covenant – which would have meant that they could NOT EVER kill one another. They were not willing to make that covenant promise.

But this was what Jesus did. He forgave it all. He even washed the feet of His betrayer, his denier, and all those who would very soon desert Him. The table is a place where ANYONE WHO WOULD DIE could experience forgiveness – could step over the line from living in the past – the reign of sin and death – to living in the present-future – the arrival of God in THIS very moment of history.

The central feature of the message of Jesus is the challenge of forgiveness – accompanied by the offer of the possibility of a new kind of relationship with God and with one another. This is the table of forgiveness, the table of dreams, the table which makes the whole world new.

How blessed we are to be part of it. A whole new world, based on loving one another as He has loved us. PHOENIX RISING. Amen. (Help in this last section from EUCHARIST AS SACRAMENT OF INITIATION, Nathan D. Mitchell, p. 39-42)