

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Maundy Thursday: The Table  
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## Remembering Jesus's Last Supper

Leader: On the first day of unleavened bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to Jesus,

**People: "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"**

Leader: So Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them:

**People: "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."**

Leader: So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them,

**People: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer."**

Leader: Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying,

**People: "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."**

Alida and I were at a play a few weeks ago, and in the Playbill there was an announcement about another play. The announcement declared that the place formerly known as "The Table," had changed its name to "The Most Beautiful

Room in New York.” And I wondered why, especially since, as the author says, “Our show is about tables, and the communion they bring.” Heck, tables are universal, basic, and almost sacred.

In Church terms, the table is the Communion Table. It’s front and center in every Church. It doubles as the altar. The cross is always on it. We put the offering plates there. The flowers are there. And on Communion Sunday, it is transformed into “The Lord’s Table,” as a lot of Churches call it.

It symbolizes the table where Jesus had his Last Supper, which was Passover. We imagine Jesus and his disciples gathered around some big old wooden table, handmade, rough hewn, strong and sturdy, covered with all the things that make the Passover meal so special: radishes, greens, saltwater, wine, unleavened bread—each food a stark reminder of the awful years of slavery in Egypt.

Christianity ended up narrowing down the Passover meal to just the bread and the cup; and so, on Communion Sunday, the Communion Table, the Lord’s Table, is covered with a lovely linen tablecloth, and then, like lots of families at special meals, we bring out the good silver: the beautiful Communion trays, some with the pieces of bread, some with the little cups of juice, all making an impressive display.

In our own lives, tables play a big role, don’t you think? How many important conversations are held around the kitchen table? How many momentous gatherings take place around the dining room table? I’m old enough to remember when every family ate every dinner around that table. But I’m also old enough to remember the advent of television, which led to the creation of TV dinners, those little TV tables, those foldout tables for one, just big enough to hold your TV dinner while you watched TV. And yet, if anything, TV dinners at their little foldout tables only made the real dining room table all the more special.

The setting of that table for Thanksgiving, for Christmas, for family gatherings, everything just so, everything thought out. It’s a place of bounty, of beauty, of memories: a sacred space. Seriously, if you were going to dedicate one room in your house as sacred, wouldn’t it be the dining room?

Think of the 23rd Psalm. It is perhaps the most universally famous Scripture in the whole Bible, a promise of God’s protection and care and sustenance.

“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want  
He leadeth me beside still waters  
He restoreth my soul.”

And then we say, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." What a statement! "Thou preparest a table, *a table*, in the presence of mine enemies."

Enemies are lurking all around, and we get a table! It doesn't say, "Thou preparest a stockpile of weapons, a nuclear arsenal, a missile defense system, a UN resolution in the presence of mine enemies." No. "Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies." You have to love the image. Your enemies are just across the way. Their horses are chomping at the bit. Their soldiers are raring to go. Their swords and spears are glimmering in the sun, and you sit down at a nicely laid out table, sort of leisurely enjoying breakfast. You lean back, sip your coffee; no rush, no anxiety, no fear. At peace. A good table can do that for you. What a message that sends. Of confidence, of faith, of courage.

When Alida and I travel, we always search out the homes of authors. I want to see the place, the environment that fostered their genius. In Paris we loved Victor Hugo's home and imagined him at work on "Les Misérables." We found Honoré de Balzac's house, and I fell in love with his writing and with his writing table so much that I really did ask the security guard if I could climb over the velvet rope and sit at it—which I did! And then, Alida found a photo of the table and had a Vermont carpenter make me my own Balzac writing table.

In Belgrade, Serbia, every museum in the city was still closed after the Balkans War, but we found the second-floor apartment of Ivo Andrić, the great Serbian Nobel Prize winning writer, and I stood reverently at his writing table and his kitchen table. In Prague, I stalked Franz Kafka and Vaclav Havel, the tables they sat at, the cafés they thought at, as short stories and plays and even revolution poured from their pens.

My search for tables is the search for intimacy, the kind of personal connection that comes around a table. That kind of intimacy took place at Jesus's Last Supper in what's called "The Upper Room." If you go to Jerusalem, you can go there. It's either the actual place or a pretty good stand-in. Ancient, simple, not that big. That night, 2,000 years ago, "Maundy Thursday" we now call it, Jesus turned his Last Supper into Holy Communion, and it was done family style, with intimacy. There were probably 20, 25 people there that night, serving, clearing, pouring, eating; they shared dipping bowls, the Bible says. Jesus washed everybody's feet, he prayed a long prayer for unity, he hinted at bad things to come, he spoke very, very, very personally, the way you speak with family around the family table. He spoke from the heart.

One of the problems with religion is that we take lovely moments like that, and we turn them into ritual; we ossify them. Nowadays, there are about three ways to take Communion. In some Churches, you walk down front, single file, the priest puts a wafer in your mouth or your hand, and off you go. In some Churches there is an altar rail. You walk down front, single file, you find a place along the altar rail, you kneel, and the priest gives you the wafer and a sip from the chalice. In our Church, you stay put in your pew, the deacons bring you a tray of bread and a tray of cups. You pick one of each, and we partake all together.

It's probably a matter of logistics. How do you serve 500 or 2,000 efficiently in a reasonable amount of time? If I had my druthers, we'd have Communion only four times a year, make it rare and very special. We'd hold it in the Memorial Room. Get those big round tables that seat eight or 10, seat you there, do the whole worship and Communion thing around the table. Have real bread we all break, have real drinks we pour and refill, have coffee and nibbles, make it personal, familial, conversational, intimate. Well, once a year we come close to that. *Tonight*. Tonight, with our "One Long Table Lord's Supper."

We started this about 10 years ago. As your pastors, Alida and I come up with new ideas all the time that fall into three categories: first, there are the awful ideas, usually mine. I come up with an idea; I offer it to Alida with exuberance. She shuts it down immediately.

For example, I've wanted to be the Christmas donkey for years. I come down the aisle, very dapper in a smoking jacket, big floppy donkey ears, come up here on the altar, sit down on a rocking chair, gather some kids around, and tell the Christmas story from the perspective of the Christmas donkey, the family donkey that Mary rode all the way to Bethlehem, the donkey that was in the stable. Vetoed. No way. I have lots of awful ideas that thankfully never see the light of day.

The second category is for failed ideas. They seemed good at the time. We tried our best. They failed. For two years at least, we held Wednesday night services in the summer out in the Memorial Garden. For about five years we had Saturday night services in the sanctuary. Sometimes only three people came, Alida and I and some poor soul all alone with the pastors. Some nights, even Alida and one poor soul didn't come. Eventually, we put both bad ideas out of their misery.

But once in a blue moon we get it right. Our Maundy Thursday "One Long Table," Holy Communion, Lord's Supper is just right.

In a few moments, this sacred space will be our "Upper Room." We will be friends and family. We'll gather around the table made beautiful by the season. There will be bread for us to break and to pass; and juice to pour and to share; grapes within reach; symbols of life and spring all about. And we will gather together around our Table.