

## **Communion Meditation**

**Matthew 25:31-46; Isaiah 25:6-9**

**Second Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee**

**February 24, 2008**

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For this whole month, on Sunday mornings and Sunday nights and Wednesday nights and at a weekend retreat a few weeks ago, we have been thinking together about our calling to share the bread of life, our calling to serve as hosts, welcoming the stranger, the outsider, the newcomer, into our fellowship and into the kingdom of God.

Usually when we think about evangelism and outreach, we think about maybe recommitting ourselves to going out on Monday nights for visitation, knocking on doors and the like.

What I am wanting us to think about is a different twist on that—think about welcoming people in to God’s table and get in our minds the image of hospitality as a guide for us.

And so as I’ve thought about all of this and the communion that we are sharing today, I’ve wondered what would happen if we decided to just set aside everything else and start setting places at our table. We just set everything aside and set aside all the differences and barriers and just start setting places at the table and, like a good host with more than enough to go around, go out and welcome people in.

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus describes a scene. He has been talking in a series of parables here at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. He’s been talking about the last judgment. And several things are clear.

There’s no doubt as to Jesus’ return. He will return, at last, in power and great glory to straighten out the planet earth.

Everyone will be there.

Then he says that all the people will be gathered before him and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will put the sheep, the good, on his right and the goats, the bad, on his left.

And the sheep, the good, will claim their inheritance, the kingdom.

On what basis will he make his selection?

*I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat.*

*I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink.*

*I was a stranger, and you invited me in.*

*I needed clothes, and you clothed me.*

*I was sick, and you looked after me.*

*I was in prison, and you came to visit me.*

Usually when we talk about this passage of scripture or talk about the end of time, we focus on images of death for some and salvation for others.

What we usually don’t emphasize is the restored community that is brought into existence. What I mean is the fact that in

the end God will overcome the things that divide us as a people, and we will all gather together around the great banqueting table of the kingdom of God.

The prophet Isaiah describes this restored community at the end of time in the passage that I read earlier:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. . . . He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth.*

And our acts of welcoming others as described in Matthew 25 allow us to be a part of God's ultimate restoration of community.

The images we are given here are images of people engaged in very common, basic acts of relationship. The hungry are fed. The thirsty are refreshed. The stranger is invited in. Everything is restored.

When we welcome others to the table of our fellowship, it is a foreshadowing—is gives us a taste— of God's kingdom in which everyone will finally be welcomed at the table.

[www.reallivepreacher.com](http://www.reallivepreacher.com) is one of the most widely read blogs on the internet. Real Live Preacher is the blogging alias for Gordon Atkinson, pastor of a small Baptist congregation in San Antonio, Texas.

In one of his blog entries from the fall, Gordon writes about illegal immigrants from Mexico and a friend of his who has a ranch in South Texas.

If you've ever been to South Texas, you know that as you head south out of San Antonio, you begin to enter the brush country. It's something of a cross between a desert and a briar patch. Cacti abound, and almost every plant has thorns or spines of some kind. Everything is armored and protected.

It is this brutal and scorched countryside that thousands of Mexicans brave each year as they cross the border looking for the possibilities of the good life in the United States. They travel mostly at night. During the day they lie under mesquite trees.

With little or no education, many of them do not realize how far it is from the border to civilization. They cross in remote areas, sometimes without guidance and always without adequate water.

Some manage to find isolated ranch houses. Terrified of the border patrol, they watch these houses closely before sneaking over to the faucet to slurp water until their bellies and milk jugs are full. Then they crawl back to the brush to wait for nightfall.

No one can estimate the numbers of Mexicans who have died under the sun in the thousands of square miles of open country in South Texas. They die every day. Sometimes their bodies are found clutching crude, hand-drawn maps and empty milk jugs. But mostly their bodies are never found. They die alone, of thirst. No one wants to imagine what the end is like for them.

Their families will always wonder what happened. Did they die, or did they find a new life and forget about their loved ones back home? The border patrol claims to have captured and sent home 1.2 million illegal immigrants along the southern border of the United States in 2004 alone. These are the ones they caught. No one knows how many got away and either made it or died trying.

The safest way to sneak into the United States from Mexico is in the company of an experienced guide. These are people who have made the trip successfully a number of times and bring others across with them. These guides know the landmarks and have little maps with water and safe hiding places marked on them.

Sometimes, when the stars are out and the humidity is holding the heat of the day close to the earth so that even darkness is not much relief, think about the people who are moving northward under the cover of night. Imagine their maps and the most basic of human needs that are expressed with pencil marks.

*Water. Safe place. Danger! Friendly ranch—food.*

So Gordon Atkinson writes on his blog about Roger, a friend of his, who has a ranch about 40 miles north of the border with Mexico and 25 miles from the nearest town. There are no paved roads leading to his property. He is there about twice a month on weekends.

Roger has a simple house that was on the ranch when he bought it. It is made of wood and has a kitchen, some bunks and a bathroom. Gordon asked him if he had ever seen any

illegal

aliens.

*Now and again, he said. But not very often. They don't want to be seen. But sometimes you can tell they've passed this way.*

When Roger goes home at the end of the weekend, he leaves the door to his ranch house unlocked and puts cans of food out on the counter. There is a sign on the door written in Spanish. It says, *Please turn off the water and close the door when you leave. Thank you.* Many people report destruction of property by illegal aliens, but in the eight years that Roger has owned his ranch he has not had a single incident of vandalism or theft. When he comes back to his ranch the door is always closed, the water is never running and the food is always gone.

I hope you don't hear this as a story about the political issue of illegal immigration, because it's not. I don't know the right answer to all of that. This is just a simple story of hospitality and welcoming the stranger, the outsider, the newcomer.

I'm pretty sure that Roger's ranch is marked on some of the maps that illegal immigrants carry north with them. It is likely marked with a big star and an arrow pointing to it. *This is a safe place. Water and food and a friendly rancher.* Writing about this Gordon Atkinson asks, How many desperate people have passed through Roger's ranch? How many of God's children have received a cup of cold water and an ounce of hope there? They are hungry. Their water is gone. They stumble upon Roger's house, read the sign, and go inside to find not only water but also food and a restroom.

Imagine the stories that are told in shacks and adobe homes of the sign on his door and the miracle of food found in the nick

of time. Can you hear their prayers of thanks for the blessed saint whose name they do not know?

I love that thought—that Roger's house is marked on a thousand little maps. His home has been a place of grace larger than the open land, larger than life, larger even than suffering.

I would hope somebody would say that about my house. I would like to think that God's house is marked on a thousand little maps. I'd like to think that this church might be marked on a thousand little maps. Not just the maps of illegal immigrants or the homeless but the maps of all people in need of an open door and a place at God's table.

Safe place. Welcoming place.

If you're alone, you will find welcome.

If you are broken, you will find healing.

If you are hungry and thirsty, you will find the kind of nourishment you need.

You will find an open door. You will find a place at the table. Maybe on a map of Memphis, somebody might make a circle at the corner of Perkins and Walnut Grove and write in pencil: "door open—place of grace."

I'd like to think our church could be marked on a thousand little maps; that this has been—that this will be— a place of grace larger than loneliness, larger than judgment, larger than suffering. Imagine the stories that could be told.

Leaving the door open.

Putting the welcome mat out.

Setting places at God's table.

And welcoming all people in.

That's what we're about.

And as we share from the table now together, it gives us a glimpse— it gives us a taste, I should say—of the kingdom of God.