

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**  
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**Family Table**  
Mark 10:14

In the Presbyterian theological tradition the focal point of the Sacrament of Communion is a family table. John Calvin's followers in France emphasized this understanding by having the congregation seated at tables for communion. John Knox took this practice with him to Scotland. Churches were redesigned to provide space for large tables at the front. Worshipers came forward in groups to be seated around these tables where they shared the elements with one another. This was a powerful statement that communion is not about what the clergy are doing up front. It is about the gratitude and joy that the people bring to the table. It is about our connection to Christ and to one another as a family of faith.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark Jesus addresses the meaning of our family table. Jesus and the disciples are on a journey to Jerusalem. It is a time for Jesus to help the disciples understand their identity as his followers. It is an opportunity for the disciples to prepare for the night when they will be together with their Lord around the family table in the upper room in Jerusalem.

Jesus notices that the disciples are engaged in the practice of rejecting children. They have bought into ancient society's view of children. Children were not valued in that culture. They had no status and no rights. They were considered sub-human at worst and a nuisance at best. When Jesus received the children and took them into his arms to bless them he was demonstrating that everyone is welcome in the family of God. The grace of God is at work to bless all those who are rejected.

On this World Communion Sunday we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We do so remembering that we are in fellowship with Christians of every race, language, and culture as we gather around this table. This day reminds us that we are part of a family that is beyond our capacity to define or limit. We don't choose who gets to be part of this family. We all come with empty hands to celebrate the grace of God's acceptance of us.

After the Reformation became well established in Scotland a unique practice began to take shape. Presbyterians created communion festivals which emphasized the family of God on a very large scale. Communion celebrations were organized in open air locations with thousands of people gathering for a four day event. A group of ministers would be present delivering sermons on a rotating basis at three or more different booths or stations. Sermons on Friday and Saturday would provide a preparation for people to participate in the sacrament. Those who completed this preparation process would receive communion tokens. The tokens were good for admission to a communion service on Sunday. Tables were set up in the open air for hundreds of people who rotated through the communion service until thousands had been served. Communing around these tables with so many strangers who had become brothers and sisters in Christ was for many participants an emotionally charged experience. Monday was set aside for sermons of thanksgiving before people headed for home. These celebrations were seen by some as a Reformed alternative to the holy days of the Catholic calendar.

Scottish Presbyterians took this practice with them to Ireland and later to America. A New England Congregationalist named David Brainard discovered this practice when he moved to Pennsylvania in the early 1740s to begin working with the Delaware Indians. He was amazed by the impact these gatherings had on those who took part. There was nothing like it in New England. He decided to implement this practice with the Delaware Indians. He found that this festival atmosphere worked well with the Delaware who had a long history of outdoor ritual celebrations. In June of 1746 Brainard did something very brave. He led a large group of Delaware to a communion celebration in Freehold, New Jersey where Indians and Scottish Presbyterians sat together at the same tables. Brainard wrote about this experience some years later. In language that is evocative of later descriptions of America as a melting pot, he said that around those tables people were "melted with the love of Christ (Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, pages 54-56)." That transforming love is what this family table is all about.