

THE WELCOME TABLE

Luke 14:15-24

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It's amazing that we are here, 2000+ years after Jesus, that we are still here, bearing his name. After all, the early church was a historic underdog of biblical proportions. It had absolutely no business surviving. In the wake of Jesus leaving, it existed in a vice-like squeeze between the Roman government and local religious leadership, both of whom considered this fledgling movement a threat and a problem. The early church was a group of people without a home. The remaining movement of a few hundred faithful people should have fizzled out and died out after the departure of Jesus. It didn't have power or political sway or any of the tangible markers we use to identify success. No financial support, no building, no cultural influence. How miraculous is it that the church survived its fragile beginning?

Why is it, do you think? Is it that Jesus had such charisma, such a deep connection with the people he met and touched that they were able to keep his stories alive, sharing from one person, one generation to the next? Is it because of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which gave a unifying energy to this group of people, a Spirit that took the place of Jesus' physical presence and kept the group going? Is it because of Paul, who personally spread the Christ story to so many places?

It is all these things, and also this. Jesus imagined for us a better world. He described it for us in parables and stories, and he showed it to us by example, in the way he

treated people. He gave us a vision of how the world can be, when we live according to God's ideals. It is a vision that fills us with hope.

It is a shepherd who cares so much about every single sheep that he will search for one that is lost, search and search and search, until the lost one is found, because no one sheep is expendable, logic doesn't matter, math doesn't matter, numbers don't matter, it doesn't matter that he still has 99 out of a flock of 100. What matters is that one is lost, and the shepherd will not rest until that one is home safely. That is how much God loves each one of us. That is what the kingdom of God, the reign of God is like.

It is like a father whose son has left home with his inheritance. This son treated the father as poorly as one could be treated. He asked for his share of the inheritance, which is a way of saying, "I wish you were already dead." He left without a thank you, without a goodbye, without a forwarding address. But that doesn't matter. "He is my son, and I love him, and I want him home," the father says as he walks to the end of the road every night before sundown, peering down the road as far as he can see, trying to catch a glimpse of that lost child. And one night, he thinks he sees something, an outline he can barely make out. But we know the way our children walk, we would recognize it anywhere. The father's feet are planted. He cannot move. He doesn't want to risk losing that glimpse. Gradually it becomes more clear. He can't believe that it's finally happening. His boy is coming home. Everyone in town would tell him what he should do at that moment. He should punish that young man. Teach him a lesson. Let him know how much he hurt the father. But the father's heart leaps with joy and love. He throws his arms around his son and throws a party that, 2000 years later, we're still talking about. That is what the reign of God is like.

One of the images Jesus uses most often to describe the realm of God is a party, a banquet, a wedding feast. It wasn't an idea that was original to Jesus. He learned about this vision when he sat at the feet of the rabbis. We can read about it in many places in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, a great feast where people will come from the north and the south, the east and the west, a banquet at which God is the host. At this banquet all people are welcome. Every time we gather around the communion table, we are experiencing a taste of this banquet, a foretaste, it's called, a prelude to what we will experience when God's kingdom is here in all its fullness. The reign of God, then, is an experience of abundance - an abundance of food and an abundance of hospitality. No one is excluded from this great feast.

Except, our passage for today tells us. Except those who exclude themselves. A couple decided to have a dinner party, made all the arrangements, rented the party center, called the caterer, and invited all their friends. But one by one, the excuses came. "Oh, we thought we could come, but our son has a soccer tournament that weekend." "Sorry, but we have tickets to the game." "My wife is going to a wedding shower that day." "Can we have a rain check? We have to help my mother-in-law move that weekend." The hosts started to get angry, and were determined not to waste all that food they'd paid for in advance. "We'll show them! We're going down to the Haven Center and inviting the homeless people to our party. Then we'll go to Primary Purpose and invite the guys who live there, and finally we'll go to Family Promise and invite those families. We'll see if there's anybody hanging out down by St. Paul's who looks hungry. We'll keep going until we fill the party center. If some of our friends decide to show up, they're going to find out that the party's already started and it's too late for them."

Some people exclude themselves. Sometimes we all exclude ourselves. We fill our lives with so many activities that we forget to leave room for the things that matter most.

The point of this story, is not the excuses, not to make people feel guilty; it's the extravagance of the hospitality. This is what God's hospitality looks like - like a table that is always expanding, always making room. No one is excluded except the people who exclude themselves.

This is what the early church was like. At its best, it was a community, one whose lifeblood was real, authentic, interdependent relationships. People gathered together to bear one another's burdens, to worship and learn and serve, and to work out together how the words and ministry of Jesus translated into the ordinary lives of those who sought to follow after him. An odd collection of humanity came together daily to share stories, to break bread, and to encourage one another.

The table is a symbol of God's extravagant hospitality. The best community-building happens around a table. Families become who they are around the table. Something happens when people sit down together, in a few unhurried moments, to share, to laugh, to tell stories. There can be incredible intimacy when two people sit across a table from one another and eat together, when they tell one another the stories of their lives, who they really are, when they share something vulnerable, when they risk taking off their public masks and show their faces to one another.

Doug and I went to the Ohio State game last Saturday. We arrived very early, and went into the Varsity Club to get out of the sleet. We were at a booth down in the basement, sitting across from one another, and I noticed an older man standing by Doug's side of the booth. After a couple of minutes, he said to Doug, "Do you mind if I sit down?" The

place was packed; there were no empty seats, and this man was in his 80's. He sat down and we said hello. After a minute we realized he was there with a younger man, whom I presumed to be his son, so I invited him to sit down next to me, and soon the four of us were talking. The two men were not father and son. They met because the younger man was the older man's surgeon. They both live in Arkansas. One day the older man came to his doctor's appointment wearing an Ohio State sweatshirt, they realized they were fellow alums, and started traveling to football games together. We talked further, and realized the older man had once lived in Cleveland, he had a son who was an attorney - a man who had died a couple of years ago - whom Doug had known. It was one of those small-world moments. It would never have happened if the older man had not asked for us to expand our table to include him.

As you read through the gospels, you will notice Jesus' table ministry, the way he so often used the act of sharing a meal, the act of breaking bread, as a way of letting people know that they were seen and heard and known and respected. With great regularity, Jesus used the common moments to incubate the sacred - everything becoming a sort of a living parable to illustrate the tangible reality of spirituality. The table was an altar around which he welcomed the world to experience communion with God and with one another.

Most startling was the diversity of Jesus' table. He gathered with priests and prostitutes, with the religious elite and the common street rabble, with his disciples and with his adversaries. How many of us can say we willingly gather with those who dislike or oppose or displease us, that we seek fellowship with those whom we perceive to be our enemies? There at the table they were all treated with equal dignity, and they all left his presence with that dignity intact - even if he sometimes had hard words for them.

In the times of Jesus even more so than today, the act of sharing a meal with someone was a sign of respect, of association with another - of one's willingness to be seen in fellowship. It was a very public endorsement. Because of this, Jesus' diverse choice of meal companions often made people really angry. Then as now, we're often known by the company we keep. And this is the specific tension we are called to live in as we seek to create conversation where there has been silence, as we try to forge relationship where there has been estrangement.

Do you think our world would begin to shift if more Fox Republicans sat down at a table with MSNBC Democrats and really sought to understand each other? If more police officers and Black Lives Matter protestors shared a meal together, and really listened to each other's stories?

Beginning the first Tuesday of December, a group of Muslims will be in our chapel for coffee and discussion once a month. It is an opportunity for us to get to know one another as human beings.

Once a quarter, we host those in our church who find themselves homeless. As we share meals together, we begin to see what we have in common.

The Welcome Table is a table that expands and expands and expands. We all know what it feels like to be excluded, uninvited, unwanted and ignored. Now let's experience and share the opposite - at this table, all are welcome.

*Inspiration and some quotes for this sermon from [A Bigger Table](#), by John Pavlovitz