

Room at the Table

John 21: 11 – 13

¹¹ Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

Philippians 2: 5 – 11

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Back in the spring of 2000 Dianna and I had a wonderful opportunity to visit the Holy Land. It was a whirlwind tour, covering in 10 days what normally takes 14 days! But it was truly unforgettable to be in the place where all this actually started, to walk – literally – on the same roads as Jesus, to pray in an Olive grove in Gethsemane, surrounded by 2,000 year old olive trees...’wonderful’ doesn’t quite cover it.

There are ‘revelations’ to be found in Israel even in places where you aren’t expecting them. Our tour guide was from the US – Moorestown, actually – and our group, which was not a large group, traveled in a rented mini bus, with a driver who was from Jordan. His name was “Mohammad”, and he was, obviously, a Muslim. We all made a effort to speak to him, and include him in our conversations as much as possible – something, that we later discovered, was not typical of tour groups. [A sad thing to realize!]

Toward the end of the visit, our guide told us that Mohammad had informed her not to make lunch plans on a certain day, because he had something planned for us. So, at lunchtime, he drove us to a kind of a park, there were a few trees, anyway! – and there were some people there who were obviously waiting for us.

We got out of the bus and they gathered around us, and we found out that we were going to be treated to the noon meal – which was the *main* meal there. And there was a table set up with lots of food, enough for our entire group, local food – kind of casserole type dishes with rice and meat (maybe goat?), pineapples and bananas and other fruit, all very delicious. We were told then, that

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the people there were Mohammad's extended family – and all of them together had purchased, cooked, and served this meal to us. I'm sure it was an extravagance for them, especially coming from people who really had very little – materially – to begin with.

We all felt honored, and it was a joyful occasion. But I didn't understand the full significance of this meal until later, when our tour guide took us aside and explained it to us. She told us that in Middle Eastern culture, having a meal with someone forms a kind of social bond, almost a 'contract'. And when they cooked this meal for us, and served *us*, and when we received it, it was a way of their saying, "You are now part of our family."

And again, even the significance of *that* had to be explained to me... to be a family member meant (among other things) that we were under their protection. They would fight, if need be, to protect us – not a trivial obligation in that sometimes dangerous part of the world. We – very different people that we were – were bonded together... by a meal.

My mind went back to something that I had read about the 23rd Psalm. I had always pictured that line that says "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...*" as David sitting at a table, having an ear of corn or something, eating peacefully, even as he was surrounded by his enemies. Now, that may have been the case, to some degree for him; but the significance of a table set in the *presence of enemies*, is that there is now a set place for reconciliation.

In that culture, an enemy who sits *with you* at a table; an enemy who shares a meal with you, is no longer an enemy! When Mohammad and his family prepared a table for us, we accepted, and were placed under their protection. There was no room for enmity between us.

In the 23rd Psalm, the Table is prepared by God himself...and we *all* are invited to come. Come to God's table! Come and find peace. Peace with God. Peace with one another, with those who are with you at this table... it is all part of the gift, it is from God, and it is for all of us!

Meals in our Western culture don't typically have that deeper significance, do they? I think of all the lunches that I've eaten while leaning over the kitchen sink with my coat still on... because I'm in such a hurry, and I realize that even on more formal occasions I don't always 'get' that this is an

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important time. (Although, when our children were growing up, and even when they got involved in sports and musical stuff, rehearsals, practices, etc., Dianna was very careful to maintain a common meal time as often as possible – even if it meant eating pretty late. And her husband nearly starving! I appreciated that.)

Mealtimes for many people never have any more significance than a way to keep our physical bodies going. And I think we might be missing out on something important.

In his book, Connecting, psychologist Larry Crabb wrote this:

A friend of mine was raised in an angry family. Mealtimes were either silent or sarcastically noisy. Down the street was an old-fashioned house with a big porch where a happy family lived. My friend told me that when he was about ten, he began excusing himself from his dinner table as soon as he could without being yelled at, and walking to the old-fashioned house down the street. If he arrived during dinnertime, he would crawl under the porch and just sit there, listening to the sounds of laughter.

When he told me this story, I asked him to imagine what it would have been like if the father in the house somehow knew he was huddled beneath the porch and sent his son to invite him in. I asked him to envision what it would have meant to him to accept the invitation, to sit at the table, to accidentally spill his glass of water, and hear the father roar with delight, “Get him more water! And a dry shirt! I want him to enjoy the meal!”¹

I wonder at times whether people have any place in their lives that is ‘safe’. Do *you*? A place of peace? Whether it is a table, or a room, or under a porch, or in a forest... is there *somewhere* that you can go where you know you are safe? a place of reconciliation... a place of peace? A place where you know God will always ‘be’?

As I was thinking about this idea of God’s Table, it occurred to me how frequently in the Gospels we find Jesus eating with people. So much of his teaching, his healings, his conversations, take place within the context of a meal. What’s really interesting about that is the variety of people that he eats with.

Jesus was constantly in hot water because of the people he chose to eat with. For instance, we find him in the home of a man named Simon. Simon the *Leper*. Jesus calls a tax collector to come down out of a tree and then invites himself over to his house for dinner. After dinner, Zacchaeus responds

¹ Larry Crabb, Connecting (Word, 1997)

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by promising to pay back everyone he cheated, and to give *half* of his accumulated wealth to the poor; and Jesus says: “*Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*” What a dinner that was!

Jesus invited a man named Matthew (Levi) – another hated tax collector – to become a disciple. Matthew says, “Yes” to the invitation, and in Luke 7 we read that he then threw a great banquet for Jesus. He invited his friends. We read that it was attended by “*a large crowd of tax collectors and others.*” And we see this same thing happening over and over – at Mary and Martha’s home, in the home of numerous Pharisees, at a kitchen in Emmaus – Jesus eats with people, and these meals become significant times, life-changing events for those who come.

You quickly get the picture that no matter who was paying for the meal, no matter who was the designated host or the hostess, no matter whose home it was taking place in, when Jesus was at the table, *everything* changed. The meal became a place of grace, a place of welcome.

During one meal – at a Pharisee’s home, whose name was also Simon – during the meal, a woman approached Jesus. Now, in those days, to picture this, don’t think of a table with chairs, and placemats, and so forth. The Greek describes that they would ‘recline at table’ because that’s what they did – so the table was very low, and they would lean on their left side, sometimes even resting on the person behind them, and serve themselves food with their right hand.

Which means that their feet would be pointing away from the table. And as they were ‘reclining at Simon’s table’, a woman approaches – Luke simply says,

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Jesus explains to the highly offended Simon that ‘this woman’s sins – which were many – have been forgiven. And that’s why her demonstration of humility and love was appropriate. But there, at a table where Jesus sat, she felt welcome enough – brave enough – to endure ridicule and even hostility. Because all she saw at that table was Jesus. Saying, “Come”.

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I came across a clip from a film that some of you may have seen. It is from a documentary called The Way We Get By - Greeting The Troops. Three senior citizens have been on call 24/7 for the past six years, and have made history by greeting – welcoming home – nearly one million U.S. troops at a tiny airport in Maine. Their work clearly demonstrates the meaning of community at a time when America needs it most.

[show clip – The Way We Get BY]

We began talking about the concept of “Radical Hospitality” last week, as Pastor HY powerfully talked about what it means to go the extra mile; not to offer simple hospitality, but rather, “*radical*” hospitality. This morning, the hope of this message is that we would begin to see how any radical hospitality that we may show to others begins with God’s Radical hospitality for us.

The message of Christmas – truly, the *entire Bible* – can be summed up in that statement of Jesus as he emerged from dinner with the notorious ‘sinner’ named Zacchaeus. “The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.”

The Bible tells us that we – all of us – apart from a meaningful relationship with our Creator, are among the lost in this world. Apart from God there is something missing from our lives. We are incomplete... we lack purpose and direction... and we all stumble under the weight of our sins and disobedience. But that message continues: we are loved by God more than we will ever understand in this life or the next.

And God does not want for us to live forever apart from him. So he came to earth to save us. He came in humility in the form of Jesus Christ – as we read in Philippians 2, as a slave, obedient to God’s plan to the point of death on a Cross. And through that Cross, we have an open door into a new life with God. A life of peace, a life of forgiveness... a life of hope and love.

And the greatest symbol of that new life... is God’s Table. On the night before Jesus gave his life for us he took bread, and broke it, he gave it to his disciples and said, “Eat... this is my body broken for you.” And he passed the Cup, saying “This is my blood of the New Covenant, shed for you and

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for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Eat this bread... drink this cup, and *know* that your sins are forgiven.

There is an inherent invitation that takes place here every time we celebrate the act of Holy Communion. Jesus’ Invitation is not something that we simply respond to once and then it’s over. It is something that we respond to day after day, year after year. We say ‘yes’ to Jesus every time we choose the truth over lies... every time we are obedient to God, especially when it is much easier to do our own thing, and go along with the crowds. We say “yes” to Jesus’ call to “follow me” every time we share even a cup of cold water in his name.

And we say “yes” to him whenever we make a decision to come forward and kneel at this Holy Place. As we take the Bread and Drink the cup of the New Covenant. So we come here after self-examination, coming thoughtfully, prayerfully...

But we also come with joy – because this is God’s Table. It has been prepared by human hands, but our real Host is Jesus himself. He is here. This is the ultimate ‘safe place’. This is the place, where, like those service men and women, that we return ‘home’ and find a joyful welcome. This is a place of peace, this is a table of reconciliation, and grace. We are never the same after coming to this table.

One of the last invitations in the Bible comes from the heart of Jesus, and it is an invitation to a meal: Revelation 3: 20 says, *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.”*

The invitation... is to you. Jesus invites all of us to this table... he is waiting for us, waiting to welcome us home, waiting to wash us clean... waiting to give us an opportunity to start fresh, waiting to heal the divisions among us... waiting to fill us with joy, hope, peace, and love.

All we have to do... is come.