

Luke 14: 7, 12-23; John 6: 35-37
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
August 4, 2024

The Table Jesus Sets

In October 2017, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus toured five southern states, sharing a message of community, activism, and love through music. While singing in a Memphis church, the pastor invited everyone to the Eucharist, but the chorus, seated in the balcony, stayed back. Halfway through, the pastor stopped communion, looked up, and said, "When we say everyone is invited, we mean everyone." Moved to tears, the chorus members came down to the table, experiencing the power of the gospel in a shared meal.

"The table Jesus sets is for everyone." This is my one-point sermon today.

I say that each week as my first words to invite you to the table. The gospel in seven words. The table Jesus sets is for everyone. Double click on that sentence and the love of God, the Loving Mystery that holds it all together, is revealed as an invitation. To eat supper. No wonder the early Christians made this the centerpiece of their worship.

Historian Justo Gonzalez comments about the early Christians:

"At the beginning of each week they gathered -- rich and poor, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, women and men--to celebrate the day the whole world changed, to give a toast to resurrection."

A weekly toast to resurrection. Sign me up. I know we eat the meal decently and in order, we are Presbyterians after all! I wonder sometimes if we shouldn't be standing and screaming toasts to the resurrection!

Early Christians remembered that Jesus was most disruptive when he ate with the "wrong" people — tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, lepers, and outcasts. He broke the rules and expanded the table, displeasing everyone. The word "companion" comes from the Latin *com* ("with") and *panis* ("bread"), meaning someone with whom you share bread. By eating with the marginalized, Jesus was declaring, "These are my companions, my friends." It was this kind of behavior that ultimately got him killed.

Whenever you see Jesus sitting down to eat with someone — and really his ministry is just one meal after another — get ready. He's about to break a law, a custom, a rule. It's going to get messy. Cause a problem. Disrupt.

One need only look at the past week's controversy over the Olympic opening ceremonies depicting what looks like the last supper (or more likely an ancient Greek feast). Those who are obsessed with who's in and who's out, freaked out.

The meal table and the throwing of banquets were arenas within which people negotiated and competed for social status. It was also a site of intense social scrutiny and Jesus was being closely examined by the Pharisees (verse 1), who wanted to see what his table manners would reveal about him.

Richard Rohr calls this table practice of Jesus his "most consistent social action: eating in new ways." And it was always in the midst of the eating that Jesus announced what God's reign was all about.

Here's what the stories of Jesus' ministry teach us: Religious people will destroy a person to keep a tradition. Jesus will break a tradition to help a person. (Meme I saw this week)

Jesus understood that legality and morality are not the same. Slavery, the Holocaust, Jim Crow, and separating families at the border were all legal, while helping slaves, hiding Jews, and marching in Selma were criminalized. Legality isn't a guide for morality, and Jesus demonstrated this by breaking the law with abandon.

Jesus gives us a new kind of banquet to throw. Invite the poor, the person with disabilities, the lame, and the blind. The outcasts: the transgender persons, the black and brown-skinned persons, the economically marginalized persons, the lonely ones who don't make good conversation, the smelly, the difficult to understand, the ones who will never repay you a thing. Invite them to your banquet so you can listen, learn, be enriched, empathize, to rescue you from your narcissism, to show you the way of dependence and helplessness and powerlessness. To show you that God, as *Robert Farrar Capon* says, "*emphatically does not promise to meet only the odd winner of the self-improvement lottery; God meets us all in our endless and inescapable losing.*"

Imagine the poor, disabled, lame and blind parts of yourself. You know them all. All the imperfections, bad decisions, guilt, shame. Imagine not needing to cultivate a persona to hide or overcompensate for the lame, poor, blind and crippled parts of us. In other words, those parts of ourselves are exactly that which Jesus invites around his table. Imagine a community of people sharing the broken parts of themselves with God and each other, and to know the relief of acceptance.

Imagine God saying to you, “you can bring all of that to the table and you will be loved.”

No need to pretend or overcompensate or be shrewd. You can just be. Nothing to prove and nothing to protect. I am who I am and it's enough. And in just being you, you can, in the fierce and loving eyes of God, be known completely, be whole and maybe even rest a little. Because propping up false versions of ourselves to the watching world is just exhausting.

So , there's always room for more at the table of Jesus. Including you. No matter what. In fact, at that first communion table, Jesus serves a betrayer, a denier, and a doubter. Jesus makes the guest list, we don't. His guest list has the word 'whoever' written at the top of it.

We see that 'whoever' word in our second reading from John 6. Jesus is explicitly teaching here about the table practice that Christians call the Eucharist (thanksgiving), communion, the Lord's Supper, all the same thing.

The shared center of Christian faith is not the book, but the table of Christ. Christianity is an encounter with Jesus Christ, most tangibly through the bread and wine of the sacred meal. Using all five senses, and hearing someone say “The body of Christ, given for you, The blood of Christ given for you” is the oxygen I need, we need, in a world that feels suffocating under the yoke of a thousand oppressions.

The communion table is where Jesus wants to heal the world from all that divides us. Forgive us our sins and give us his life. That's the table of the Lord.

“The body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ given for you.”

To every gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical or mental capacity, education, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and socioeconomic or marital status. This is the body of Christ, given for you.

To the spiritually homeless, skeptical, curious, or committed. This is the body of Christ given for you.

To the kid giggling in line, the teenager worried about being accepted, to the elderly man or woman wondering how much longer they will be alive. This is the body of Christ, given for you.

To the successful hotshot who doesn't know what they don't know yet, to the unemployed wondering if they will ever get a job again. This is the body of Christ, given for you.

To the mom with a baby on her hip, to the young woman behind her who longs to have a child, to those who remember days their child was with them in church and miss them terribly, this is the body of Christ, given for you.

To the addict who wonders how to get through another day, this is the body of Christ, given for you.

To the person who wonders if God exists, who wonders if they might believe again, who feels like God will have nothing to do with them, this is the body of Christ given for you.

To the person who feels overwhelmed with shame, overcome with self-loathing, and like damaged goods, The body of Christ, given for you. The body of Christ, given for you. And You. And You. And You. And You. And You.

“Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” Take Jesus at his word. The invitation is to sit with Jesus and share a meal. The invitation is to be more and more a community that builds longer tables in a world that insists on higher walls. Amen.