

Wesley United Methodist Church

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September 3, 2017

Come to the Table

Text: Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

Title: Come to the Table

I invite you to think for a minute about some of the tables that you have sat around that stick out in your memory. I think certainly of the table in my family home when I was a child, and of the table in my own home at various times in the lives of my children and now grandchildren. I think also of tables in restaurants where I have sat with friends, and of a table in South Korea, where we sat on the floor while eating. There have been many tables at church pot luck dinners or weddings, funerals, and other significant times in life.

But there are other tables as well – tables where there wasn't necessarily food present. Tables where I sat with the Bishop and Cabinet as we discussed important Conference matters and a table I sit around about once a month where we interview candidates for ministry and those hoping to renew their license for ministry. There have been workshop tables where I was the student and others where I was the leader. There have been many many tables where meetings have taken place – discussing everything from church finances, to missions, to building issues, and everything in between. There have been tables where I have sat with a group of friends just talking or maybe doing some crocheting. There have been tables where I have talked with people about political issues; sometimes we have been in agreement and other times we have strongly disagreed.

There are many tables in my present and past – and there will be many in my future – as I'm sure there will be in yours. Today, we will

receive the communion elements from the altar – or table. Table fellowship was very important to Jesus and in his culture. A meal was an important occasion for Jesus and his disciples, but it was always about more than just food.

For Jesus, a meal often involved teaching – teaching his disciples, explaining what he had been teaching the crowds, answering questions. Apparently, it was not unusual for Jesus to eat in the homes of those who would normally be considered unacceptable. He earned a reputation as one who ate with “tax collectors and sinners”. He ate with religious authorities and used these occasions to challenge some of their practices and beliefs. After teaching a large crowd and healing all day, he shared a meal with over 5,000 men as well as women and children.

In what is probably the most famous meal, the one on the night that he was betrayed – the one we particularly remember when we celebrate communion – he participated in the religious meal of the Passover. But more than that, he took once again the opportunity to try to explain to the disciples what was going to happen to him. One of the things that is impressive, to me, is that at this meal – at the table with him – was Judas, the man who would betray him, and Jesus knew it. Also present at the table was Peter, the man who would deny three times that night that he even knew who Jesus was, and Jesus knew it. At the table were the people he was the closest to, people he had traveled with for three years – and each of them would desert him before the night was over – and he knew it.

Jesus could easily have been angry that night. He could have told the disciples that they were a cowardly bunch of men who didn't deserve his presence and his love – but he didn't. He continued to love each and

every one of them. In John's gospel, we hear that he even performed the duties of a servant and washed their feet that night.

When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome, he could have been describing Jesus' actions that night. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The call to dine with Jesus is, and was, an invitation that means far more than a simple eating experience. The table was the place where Jesus not only fed people, but challenged them to acts of hospitality that reflect God's way. When we say "yes" to a place at Christ's table, we are invited to become part of a way of life that embraces God's definition of love, peace, grace, and joy.

It is not unusual at a youth retreat, or a conference where people will be dealing with difficult topics to agree ahead of time on some ground rules, or a covenant of behavior for the event. The section of Paul's letter to the Romans that we just read, could well be a guideline for a covenant for how we live our lives as Christians. It clearly gives us instructions about how we are to behave, how we are to treat one another if we are to be serious about being a follower of Jesus.

I invite you to hear those words again, but this time from Eugene Peterson's The Message. "Love from the center of who you are, don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply, practice playing second fiddle.

"Don't burn out; keep yourself fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians, be inventive in hospitality.

"Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get

along with each other, don't be stuck up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

“Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even, that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.’”

“Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.”

Wow! That's a pretty tall order. But that's who we are called to be as the church of Jesus Christ. Through the years, the church has been faced with the challenge of naming, articulating, and living out its life as a community that is different than the world around us. It is very easy for us to become comfortable with the world and to lose our identity as a distinctive and alternative community.

One of the commentators I read this week wrote that this happens when, “Worship is confused with marketing technique, stewardship with fund-raising, spirituality with meditation techniques, vitality with growth, and ministry with programs and services. Programs and services are good to have, but they often become the tail that wags the dog. What the church really has to offer is an invitation to a new community that nurtures believers to live differently, and to live out their calling both within the faith community and the wider society. Identity and mission are central here.”ⁱ

What does it really mean for us to nurture believers to live differently? What does it mean to live out our calling both here within the faith community but also, and maybe especially, in the wider society?

I think about this often and this week has been as good a time as any to think about it. During this week, as Houston and other parts of Texas and then Louisiana and surrounding areas were drowning in the extremely heavy rains from Hurricane Harvey there were many responses. One response was from the brewing company Anheiser Busch which started bottling clean drinking water to be transported to the Houston area. I went on their website and discovered that this was something they have done before in similar situations.

I wanted to find out what their motivation was, and secretly, I was hoping to discover a testimonial from someone saying that he or she was a Christian and that this was a response to their faith – to caring for those in need. I didn't find that, but I'm choosing to believe that somewhere in there are people who are living out their faith in their daily lives by taking care of those in need.

There have been many stories about responses in Houston, but in the Facebook circles in which I travel, the response from Anheiser Busch was contrasted with that of a mega church that had not chosen to make its space available to shelter people. The spokesperson for the church said that their doors were not locked and that if someone came to them for assistance their staff would help them. I wanted to scream. All too often this is the picture that people receive about the church and about Christians or those of other faiths. Too often it seems as if we are not really connected to the needs of those around us. We might help if asked but we aren't proactive about it and we might be more concerned about our own buildings than we are in reaching out to others. Now, I also know this is not universally, or, I think, even generally, true. However, it is the part that makes news.

Around this same time, there was a blistering document issued by a group of conservative evangelicals that blasted all things related to LGBT persons. Just a couple of weeks ago, the rallies in Charlestown and actions in other cities drew wide attention as hatred and bigotry were the proclamation. While most pastors that I know spoke about this in church, I also know that were churches in which it was not even mentioned – even as a prayer request.

How do we face the challenge of naming, articulating, and living out our life as a Christian community that is distinct from the society that surrounds us? There are groups that do this in ways that isolate themselves and that take stands that make me want to run in the opposite direction and make me want to scream, “That’s not my God! That’s not my faith!” That’s the way I felt about the statement that came out this week from that religious group. I think that those of us who believe differently than these groups need to start talking more about what we believe and speaking and acting in ways that show the world that Christianity is supposed to be about love, peace, grace, and joy – not about condemnation, violence, hatred and bigotry.

Once again, the letter to the Romans reminds us that when we come to the table, when we decide to follow Jesus, we are being invited to learn how to live our lives the way that Jesus did. We are to embody virtues and practices that promote life giving relations. We are to “engage a way of being and acting that seeks to embody genuine love, mutual regard, humility, solidarity, peace, and harmony. It’s a way of being and acting that cares not only for members of the faith community but also for the wider society, particularly the strangers in our midst.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus invited everyone to the table – his close friends, the religious leaders who opposed him, the tax collectors and sinners who were scorned by society. Everyone was included in the invitation to the table. – even those with whom we least want to associate. In the United Methodist Church, we practice what we call “open communion” which means that everyone is welcome at the table – from the youngest to the oldest, from the richest to the poorest, from the sickest to the healthiest, the employed and the unemployed, the sad and discouraged as well as those who are excited, happy, and pleased with life. Everyone is welcome – even those with whom we least want to associate. I wish that I could tell you that those words are true in every congregation but sadly I have been in congregations where they were not true – although sometimes the people in the church didn’t even realize it.

This week Bishop Devadhar published his regular letter to the people and churches of the New England Conference. In that letter, he spoke about forgiveness specifically and said, “I have witnessed churches distracted from their mission and ministry because of minor disputes that have escalated out of stubborn convictions. We are witnessing a world of division and violence born out of closed minds and hearts.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He asked if we are willing to “prayerfully look at our own lives as individual Christians and at our corporate lives as a part of the body of Christ to consider what limits our Christian witness?” And also, “Are we willing to address these limits in order to become a healed community that offers healing to others?”^{iv}

These are not easy questions to ask ourselves but they are important ones if we are to continue to be a distinct community that is faithful to God, faithfully following Jesus, rather than a community that becomes

comfortable in our world so that it is hard to tell the difference between the Church and any other social organization.

We couldn't have any better example than Jesus and the love God showed to us through Jesus. Jesus didn't come as an elite member of the religious establishment. He came as a despised Jew in the Roman Empire, as a lowly Galilean among the Jerusalem establishment. He lived in the mess of humanity and ultimately became a victim our societies collective dysfunction. If we are going to become followers of Jesus, we cannot become any less vulnerable with, toward and for others. We are invited to follow Jesus into the world.

Following Jesus, we practice hospitality - which I heard described this week as not only charity but justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our table – like the gifts we will give to UMCOR to help those devastated by Hurricane Harvey. Hospitality as Justice offers a place at the table to those who might be excluded for any reason.

We are reminded to do as Jesus did, “do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good.” The invitation is extended to each of us – come to the table. Come to the table of love, peace, grace, and joy. Come to the table where we are accepted and welcomed just as we are but we are also invited and challenged to grow into all that we can be with Jesus as our guide, companion, and savior.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Theological commentary on Romans

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word.

ⁱⁱⁱ Devadhar, Sudarshana. Together in Christ, Sept 1, 2017

^{iv} Devadhar,