

October 1, 2017

Come to the Table

Text: Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Title: The Table of Joy

We've been talking about the tables to which Jesus invites us; the tables where people are not only welcomed and fed, but where they – we – are also challenged to accept a way of life that embraces God's definition of love, peace, grace, and joy. Today we celebrate our common communion table with people all over the world. Through Jesus we are brought together and no matter how we got there, believing in the host of this table makes our joy complete.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul proclaims the joy of following Jesus. Coming from someone who not long ago had persecuted followers of Jesus, this is a huge transformation. His words in today's reading are words of joy and affirmation. They are words that describe the love with which we, who claim the name Christian, should live – not only when things are good, but every day, everywhere, with everybody. That's a real challenge and one that undoubtedly, we fall short of with some degree of regularity.

Paul encourages us to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus – in other words to be imitators of Jesus. We are called to live in a way that allows others to see Christ in us. When I look at my grandchildren, there are times when I can see their father in them – sometimes in the way they look, other times in their actions, in the way they say or do something. There are times when they are a reflection of their father. We are also called to be reflectors of Jesus. We are called to be imitators of Jesus.

Please note that there is a difference between being an imitator and an impersonator. We are familiar with Elvis impersonators and impersonators of others – who dress, try to sound or look like someone else. But with Jesus, it's not about impersonating Jesus – it's about being an imitator of Jesus; it's about adopting Christlike attitudes in all aspects of our life.

Paul tells us that Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Jesus didn't go around claiming that he was superior to other people, but Jesus instead really lived out all the attributes of God – the attributes that we have been talking about – inclusive and extravagant love, living at peace with all people and inviting us to do so, having compassion and offering hope and promise beyond what we deserve but which God gives simply because of who God is.

Children love to imitate the grownups around them. They love to copy us whenever they can. Dusting, sweeping, cooking, repairing a car, making something, repeating what we say; children love to imitate us – it is how they learn, it is how they grow into the people they will become. At first their efforts may make more work for us; at first their “help” may not feel like help, but we are usually so touched by their desire to be like us, that we are thrilled to have them imitating us.

I believe that it is similar for us as children of God. We are to place Jesus in this place of honor. We try to imitate who we know Jesus to be. We try to be like Jesus but we often don't do it very well – however, God is still pleased that we are trying. Christian living is a process – it's not an instantaneous change but an ongoing gradual change in our lives; it is a process of becoming more like Christ each day over a long period of time.

Claiming to be followers of Christ, carries with it a responsibility because people are watching us – for many people what they see in us will be how they judge what being a Christian is about. Mohandas Gandhi was known to say, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” While he admired and attempted to follow Jesus’ attitude in the struggle for justice for his people facing occupation in his native India, he recognized that so often the way we live not only doesn’t reflect Christ but sadly often contradicts him.

This continues today. It is not unusual to read or see news about people claiming to be Christians that make me want to run screaming in the opposite direction. I read responses on Facebook from people who are saying, “That’s why I don’t want anything to do with religion”.

Friends, the reality is that we are the only Bible some people will ever read. We are the only example that some people will ever see of what a Christian is. Our actions will often leave the world convinced or unconvinced about Christ.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians gives us a good sense of what imitating Christ is about. In this letter it is all about encouragement, love, sharing, compassion and sympathy. Paul’s letter shows a love for others that burns with a desire for the flourishing of others – a love whose joy can be made complete only when all are included. Paul burns with joy and with a love that he desperately wants the Philippians to share. He asks them to make his joy complete – not for his sake, but for theirs. His joy will be complete when and only when they know Christ in that same way – when and only when they have learned to live not from selfish ambition or conceit, but from humility to look to the needs of others.

In 2004, Mel Gibson produced a movie called “The Passion of the Christ”. It was all about the final twelve hours of Jesus’ life – a time that is often called the “Passion of Christ”. However, I would suggest to you, that while the church has adopted that phrase for the hours before Jesus’ death, the passion of Jesus is about much more than that.

The passion of Christ is not the cross – the cross was the consequence of Jesus’ passion – it was a consequence of Jesus as “Immanuel”, God with us. The cross was a consequence of Jesus passion for justice, inclusion, love, and joy. It was a result of an absolute sensitivity to the vulnerability, need, and suffering of others.<sup>i</sup> It was this passion that caused Jesus to invite outcasts to the table.

When my family gathers at my home for Thanksgiving dinner, the table is too small. So, we open it up and put in two extra leaves to extend the table – to make it big enough so that everyone can fit around the table. Jesus was constantly extending the table. Jesus ate with priests and prostitutes, with the religious elite and the common street rabble; with his disciples and with his adversaries.<sup>ii</sup>

The early church understood this. In the years following Jesus death, the church grew exponentially. Their greatest testimony was their intertwined lives; the way they lived together “perpetuated the way of Jesus and this beautiful presence was going viral because their open table reminded people of his.”<sup>iii</sup>

The table of joy is a result of God’s great love – a love that burns for the flourishing of others, a love whose joy can be made complete only when all are included. All of God’s actions of creation, all of God’s blessings and delight are for others. Jesus remained true to this divine nature, even to the point of death. Day by day, we continue in the process

of Christian living – of imitating Christ and becoming the people that God created us to be.

John Pavlovitz, a pastor and writer from North Carolina, has written a new book called “A Bigger Table”. My copy of this arrived in yesterday’s mail, and while I have only skimmed it, something jumped out at me. Speaking of the extended table that Jesus set and our desire and call to be faithful to that table, he wrote, “This is the table Christ sets over and over in the Scriptures: the place of continual restoration, perennial communion, unending fellowship. You don’t earn a spot there; you don’t fail and then find yourselves outside of it. Just ask Peter. He was one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples, the one who publicly boasted of his faithfulness to his teacher, even if it meant his own death. It would be this same Peter who would soon stand in the public square following Jesus’ arrest, denying three times that he even knew him. And the Gospel writer John describes this same Peter weeks later, standing on the shoreline, being forgiven three times by a resurrected Jesus, as a symbolic wiping away of his failure following a restorative waterside meal hosted by his teacher.

“This is the table Jesus sets. It is the table of second chances, and two hundredth chances, the table of grace. There you don’t ever lose your place, and you are never ‘finished.’

“At the table, Jesus had wisdom to share, hard words to give, and purpose to call people to, but more than that he had their humanity to affirm. He allowed them the dignity of being seen and heard and known. Imagine what it would look like if we oriented ourselves around that pursuit, if we had no other agenda than walking alongside people sharing the view of God from where we stand, not needing them to see what we see, or believe what we believe, but to encounter Jesus in our very flesh.”<sup>iv</sup>

What if, like Paul in his letter to the Philippians, we became people who are truly satisfied only when all people have the necessities of life and know their value as beloved children of God. Day by day we become people of love. People of peace. People of grace. People of Joy.

---

<sup>i</sup> Feasting on the Word, Theology essay on Philippians.

<sup>ii</sup> Pavlovitz, John A Bigger Table, Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community. C. 2017, Westminster John Knox Press. P.58

<sup>iii</sup> Pavlovitz, P.97

<sup>iv</sup> Pavlovitz, P.102