

The Rev. Dr. Skip Ferguson  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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## "A Place at The Table"

Luke 14:1, 7-14

It really is extraordinary,  
even radical, when you think about it:  
A group of people, men and women,  
gathered in worship  
stand up,  
move from their seats quietly, thoughtfully,  
move forward in an orderly line,  
and come to a table,  
where they are given, one-by-one,  
a small – very small – piece of bread,  
which they then dip into a cup of ordinary grape juice.

As they are being handed the bread  
they are told that the tiny morsel they are about to eat  
is "the bread of life";  
and then they are told that the cup extended to them,  
the cup with grape juice,  
is "the cup of salvation".

The celebrant tells all who are gathered  
the invitation to the Table  
comes not from him or from her,  
or for that matter from the church,  
but from Jesus Christ himself.

The celebrant offers a prayer we're told is called  
the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving.  
And among the prayer's words are these,  
*"Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us,  
and upon these your gifts of bread and cup,  
that the bread we break and the cup we bless  
may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.*

*By your Spirit, make us one with the living Christ,  
one with all who confess him as Lord and Savior,  
and one in ministry to all the world,  
until Christ comes in final victory  
and we feast with all the saints  
in the joy of your heavenly kingdom."*

"Make us one", we pray.

Make us one with the living Christ;  
     Make us one with all followers of Christ,  
         Make us one in ministry ... to all the world.  
 Such hope-filled words  
     in a world that seems daily to grow more polarized,  
         fractured,  
             siloed, tribal,  
                 separate:  
                     anything but one.

And then there are those words at the end of the prayer  
     those words that tell us that this simple meal,  
         with its ordinary bread and juice,  
             and its regular clockwork appearance on the church calendar,  
                 pulls back the curtain,  
                     gives us a glimpse,  
                         a hint of the life that awaits us,  
                             the life that lies ahead  
                                 when we, each of us,  
                                     take our seats at God's banquet table  
   in God's heavenly kingdom,  
                     all God's children gathered in peace,  
                         reconciled,  
                             all the saints truly in holy communion.

It is so ordinary, what we're about to do,  
     and yet so extraordinary.  
         A piece of bread becomes the bread of life,  
             a drop of juice, the cup of salvation,  
                 a tiny morsel becomes a meal that nourishes us spiritually,  
                     fills us,  
                         strengthens us, empowers us,

All so that we can go out into the world as one in ministry,  
     in the name of Jesus Christ,  
         sent by our Lord himself -  
             who really is the one who presides at this Table.

He stands with us now,  
     a soft glow in his eyes,  
         a warm smile,  
             a gentle voice saying to us, you and me,  
     "Come, Come,  
         Come all:  
             women, men;  
                 young, old;  
                     long-time member

first-time visitor;  
Come to this, my Table and be fed.”

“Come to this,  
my Welcome Table,  
Come to this,  
my table of hospitality;  
my table, where no one is a stranger;  
my table, where all are welcome.”

“Position, prestige, prominence:  
all irrelevant at this Table;  
Country of origin - irrelevant,  
Language, accent - irrelevant,  
Skin color: irrelevant,  
Gender identity and orientation -all irrelevant at this Table.”

“Come to my table” our Lord says to us,  
“and know through this meal God’s grace and love.  
Come to my table and be fed.”

So much of Jesus’ ministry takes place at tables,  
takes place at a meal,  
from the feeding of the 5000,  
to his grilling fish for his disciples on the beach  
shortly after his resurrection,  
Jesus preparing to feed the hungry fishermen,  
who at first didn’t even recognize their risen lord.

Jesus is once again at table in our gospel lesson,  
this time sitting with a Pharisee,  
a member of the religious community  
so furiously intent on ridding themselves of Jesus,

The Pharisees, and their partners the Sadducees,  
saw Jesus as a grave-enough threat  
that they decided that if they had to kill him to be rid of him,  
they would.  
Better, they thought, “*to have one man die  
than to have the whole nation destroyed*” by the Romans.  
(John 11: 50)

And yet there was Jesus sharing a meal  
with a leader of the Pharisee community,  
not to debate or argue with him,  
but simply to share a meal, fellowship,

...and, of course, teach,  
 as Jesus always did:  
*“Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!”*  
 (Mark 4:23)

And so, Jesus taught, telling the Pharisee  
 and the others at the table  
 a parable about the importance of humility,  
 followed by a parable about hospitality.

Listen:

*On one occasion*

*when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees  
 to eat a meal on the sabbath,  
 they were watching him closely....*

*When [Jesus] noticed how the guests chose the places of honor,  
 he told them a parable.*

*“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet,  
 do not sit down at the place of honor,  
 in case someone more distinguished than you  
 has been invited by your host;  
 and the host who invited both of you  
 may come and say to you,  
 ‘Give this person your place,’  
 and then in disgrace  
 you would start to take the lowest place.*

*But when you are invited,  
 go and sit down at the lowest place,  
 so that when your host comes,  
 he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’;  
 then you will be honored in the presence  
 of all who sit at the table with you.  
 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,  
 and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

*[Jesus] said also to the one who had invited him,  
 “When you give a luncheon or a dinner,  
 do not invite your friends or your brothers  
 or your relatives or rich neighbors,  
 in case they may invite you in return,  
 and you would be repaid.*

*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor,  
 the crippled,  
 the lame, and the blind.  
 And you will be blessed,  
 because they cannot repay you,*

*for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

Set a table of welcome, our Lord teaches us,  
especially for the stranger,  
the poor,  
the outcast.

We heard Rebecca reinforce this teaching  
with her reading from the letter to the Hebrews,  
*“Let mutual love continue.  
Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,  
for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

Hospitality,  
welcome,  
the very watchwords of all those who follow Christ;  
the very words we use for this Table,  
this meal.

Reaching out, extending hospitality,  
especially to the stranger, the different, the foreigner —  
it is not easy, even if we take seriously  
the idea from our lesson in Hebrews  
that we might well entertain an angel.  
It is a lesson we learn at the very beginning of the Bible  
when Abraham and Sarah  
did indeed welcome strangers who were angels.

The priest Henri Nouwen has observed,  
“The movement...to hospitality is hard ....  
Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful,  
defensive, aggressive people,  
anxiously clinging to their property  
and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion,  
always expecting an enemy to appear,  
intrude, and do harm.  
But still - that is our vocation:  
to [turn] the ...enemy into a guest,  
and to create the free and fearless space  
where brotherhood and sisterhood  
can be formed and fully experienced.”  
(Reaching Out, 65)

How right Nouwen was when he said  
hospitality is hard,  
especially when extended to the stranger.  
And yet Nouwen is simply reinforcing God’s word,

that we are to extend hospitality even to those we fear,  
those we consider our enemy:

*“If your enemies are hungry,  
give them bread to eat;  
and if they are thirsty,  
give them water to drink”*  
(Proverbs 25:21)

That’s what this Table is all about:  
as we receive our Lord’s hospitality,  
we learn hospitality  
we learn how to extend hospitality.  
As we are welcomed to this Table  
we learn how to welcome,  
friend and stranger alike  
as we build community.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Holy Envy*, writes,  
“I asked God for religious certainty  
and God gave me relationships instead.”  
Relationships - God created us for community  
and calls us to build community  
through hospitality,  
as well as through forgiveness,  
compassion  
grace.

Through this simple meal,  
this Lord’s Supper,  
we learn what Taylor learned,  
our call “to extend the same care to every human being  
that I wish for myself,  
to treat every human being  
as if he or she were Jesus in disguise.”  
Or, an angel.

So, come take your seat at this table  
our Lord’s Table,  
each of us invited by our Lord Jesus Christ,  
invited by grace, invited by love.

Come to this Table  
and eat joyfully with one another  
all God’s children gathered here  
to be nourished with the bread of life  
and the cup of salvation.

And then fed, renewed, refreshed,  
go out into the world,  
go out to build a world of welcome,  
of grace, of love,  
all in the name of the One who is grace,  
who is love;  
the One who welcomes us here and now,  
saying to each of us,  
“Come, for you have a place at the Table.”

AMEN