

“Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

Luke 5:27-32

World Communion Sunday

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I realize that the topic I have chosen for today—
tables...what do Presbyterians believe about tables—
it may not be self-evident to you at this moment,
why this is a worthwhile subject for a sermon.

I hope it will become clear in short order.

Because I believe—and I suspect many of you believe this too,
even if you don’t realize that you believe it—

that **a table is never just a table.**

Perhaps I first started to see the power of a table after the events of 9/11, over 22 years ago. There was an article in Time magazine that Thanksgiving, in which Nancy Gibbs wrote a very eloquent piece about how that Thanksgiving, in 2001, was going to look different for so many families.

“We are aware, as if we were truly all one household [this year], of the families who will face an empty chair at the table....”

But it wasn’t just families who lost someone to those terrible events that Gibbs wrote about. She also talked about families who decided to make a change in their lives because of those tragic events.

She wrote about Molly Rudberg, a marketing strategist whose parents, years earlier, divorced when she was eight. Molly became very resentful of her father after the divorce. He missed soccer games. He missed prom dances. He wasn’t around to help with homework—and it had an impact.

But after 9/11, after so many children lost their fathers, Molly decided to reach out to her father. She had her own life now, but she happened to live only 4 blocks from her father, so—at her initiative—they started meeting for breakfast every Tuesday.

“It’s emotionally draining, but it’s worth it,” she said of those reconciliation breakfasts.¹

Every Tuesday, same place, Molly and her father sitting across from one another...at a table.

Why has that particular article from 22 years ago stayed with me?
Because it was not just about 9/11.
It was also an article about the power of a table.

**You see, I believe that a table is never just a table.
And I think—perhaps—you believe that too.**

Sometimes, being at a table means we do something we don’t feel like doing.

But we do it because it’s the polite thing to do.
The right thing to do.
The grateful thing to do.

I have a vivid memory of being a newly ordained minister, first church I was serving, and this wonderful couple in the congregation invited me over for dinner.

The husband was retired.
He wasn’t a professional chef, but he was a very good chef.

¹ Nancy Gibbs, “We Gather Together,” *Time*, November 19, 2001.

Cooking exquisite recipes for dinner for guests...it was something he enjoyed doing in his retirement.

So when I went over for dinner that evening, I was looking forward to a delicious meal. We sat down at the table. They asked me to say grace. And after I said, "Amen," the gentleman went to get the first dish.

He put a bowl in front of me.
I didn't recognize the dish, but I did recognize the smell.
Before I could confirm my suspicions, he told me: it was borscht.

Beet soup!
Of course, he did not know that beets are the ONE FOOD I do not eat.

Not allergic to them, I just can't stand them...
I don't like the smell, don't like the taste,
they make me want to gag.

What did I do at that moment?

With this lovely couple sitting on either side of me, I was staring at the bowl and the spoon and in my head, I had not stopped saying grace. I was still praying...dear God, help me keep this down!

I ate the soup.
To this day, I have no memory of how I ate that soup.
But I am grateful, to this day, that I did not regurgitate that soup.
Now...why did I eat that soup?

Because table is never just a table.

And sometimes the power of a table lies not in what is being served, but in WHO is being served.

Who is getting together at the same table.
It's why the sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement were so effective.

**And Jesus knew about tables.
Jesus knew that a table is never just a table.**

As our text for today puts it:

Then Levi [the tax collector] gave a great banquet for him...and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

This is why I asked you what Presbyterians believe about tables.

Because a table is never just a table.

So...on this WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY...I would like you to consider three tables.

The first is the one that we have in this room.
We do not have an alter in the Presbyterian Church.
What we have is a communion table.

What do Presbyterians believe about this table?
Many things, but today, remember one thing:
It is Christ's table.

This is not a Westminster table.
And it's not a Presbyterian table.

It is Christ's table.

And because Jesus NEVER turned down an invitation to eat with anyone, tax collector or Pharisee...it means all are welcome at this table.

One of my favorite stories about Christ's table is told not by a Presbyterian, but by a Methodist, Peter Storey.

Storey was the former Bishop
of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa
and President of the South African Council of Churches.

And he tells the following story:

I once received a phone call in the early hours of the morning
telling me that one of the Black clergy in a very racist town
had been arrested by the secret police.

I got up, picked up another minister, and drove to the prison.
We arrived, and demanded to see our friend.

We were accompanied by a large white Afrikaner guard
to a little room where we found Ike Moloabi—
the Methodist minister—
sitting on a bench wearing a sweatsuit
and looking quite terrified.

Ike had been pulled out of bed in the early hours of a freezing
winter morning and dragged off like that.

I said to the guard, "***We are going to have Communion,***"
and I took out of my pocket a little chalice
and a tiny little bottle of Communion wine
and some bread.

I spread my pocket handkerchief on the bench between us
and made the table ready,
and we began the Liturgy.

When it was time to give the Invitation, I said to the guard:

*“This table is open to all,
so if you would like to share with us,
please feel free to do so.”*

This must have touched some place in his religious self,
because he took the line of least resistance
and nodded rather curtly.

I consecrated the bread and the wine, and noticed that Ike was beginning to come to life a little. He could see what was happening here.

Then I handed the bread and the cup to Ike...and Ike ate and drank.

[Then] I offered bread and [that same] cup to the guard.

You don't need to know too much about South Africa to understand how white Afrikaner racists felt about letting their lips touch a cup from which a Black person had just [taken a drink].

The guard was in crisis:
he would either have to overcome his prejudice
OR refuse the means of grace.

After a long pause, he took the cup and sipped from it, and for the first time I saw a glimmer of a smile on Ike's face.

Then I took something of a liberty with the truth and said:

*“In the Methodist liturgy,
we always hold hands when we say the grace...”*

And very stiffly, the guard reached out his hand,
and took Ike’s, and there we were in a little circle,
holding hands, while I said the ancient words of benediction:

*“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all.”²*

I love that story because it says very clearly what this table is about.

All are welcome.
All are in need of God’s grace.
No one is to be left out...when we come to God’s table.

Of course, the other reason I probably love that story is because it’s about something that happened in South Africa many years ago and many miles away.

And it doesn’t really force to me to examine my own heart, and whether there’s anyone in my own life whom I am CURRENTLY RESISTING—someone whom I don’t really want to extend the grace and reconciliation of God toward that person...today.

So the SECOND TABLE that I would like for you to consider today **is the table in your own heart**. You see, I believe—and I think you believe it too, even if you don’t realize you believe it—that we set a table in our own hearts every day.

² As told in Peter Storey’s article, “Table Manners for Peacebuilders,” in *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ’s Table*, Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006.

It's a table where we invite people in, or we shut them out.

It's a table where we try to reconcile with someone, or we hold a grudge against someone.

Do you know what I'm talking about right now?

The table that you set in your own heart every day?

You see, I believe—and I think you believe it too, even if you don't realize you believe it—that every day, God brings people to that table in our hearts.

People we expect to see, people we had no idea we would see.

And we get to decide every day whether those people will be welcome...at THIS table, right here.

For example, a number of years ago, my wife and I had one of our vehicles break down on us. This was ages ago, back when we lived in Indiana.

The gages on the dashboard of the SUV stopped working.

Couldn't tell how much gas was in the SUV.

Couldn't tell how fast you were going, when driving the SUV.

It was a real problem.

Now, the same problem had actually happened 7 months earlier, so we took it back to the same shop, figuring the problem would get fixed free of charge since it CLEARLY was not fixed correctly the first time.

After all, we had put \$1,500 into the repair the first time!

The shop came back and said—no, even though the symptoms are exactly the same, the cause is different—they wanted an additional \$1,100 to fix it again.

How do you think we felt about that??
We were pretty mad.

We were convinced that they made a mistake the first time, and now instead of admitting their error, they were trying to swindle us out of more money.

I drove to the shop, and let's just say, I was not wearing my PASTORAL CARE HAT at that moment.

I asked to see the shop manager.

And among other things, I told him what he was doing was dishonest and greedy. I told him I would spread the bad word about his shop all over town.

“Be careful, now...” he said.

I said, “What are doing, threatening me?”
On and on I went...

I admit, I got a little carried away that day.
It's been 15 years, and I can still picture the scene I made in that shop.

But I also noticed, when I was chewing him out for being a liar and a cheat, there was a young woman with a young child in a car seat behind the counter who was paying attention to this whole scene.

She had something of a resemblance to that shop owner.
She spoke with him a couple times during time-outs in my tirade.

It looked, maybe, like she was this shop owner's grown daughter.
It looked, perhaps, that the baby in the car seat was his grandchild.

And something about that, about seeing the shop owner in the context of his family...it caused me to THINK a lot...on my drive home...

What if, I thought to myself...what if I was wrong?
What if, in fact, what he had told me about our SUV...was true?

What if that day, the person who—
as Jesus put it long ago—
the person who was in need of a physician
was not that shop owner...
but the person who is currently preaching to you?

You see, I had closed the table in my heart to that owner.
And it is far too late for me to invite him to my table.

But there may be someone else in my life whom Jesus wants at my table. Just like there might be someone else in your life, whom Jesus wants at your table.

Can you think of a person like that right now?

Can you think of someone in your life whom you are having a hard time extending God's grace to...if you can, then let me invite you to imagine a way, or maybe more than one way, that you could open the table in your heart toward that person.

Now I know...that's not always an easy thing to do.

You may feel like you have ALREADY offered more grace to that person than you can keep track of...and doing so one more time may sound more distasteful to you than eating beet soup is to me!

But here's the thing.
Even when offering grace is a distasteful thing,
it is always a Christ-like thing...

Because Christ feeds us with his grace every single day.

So here's the THIRD TABLE that I'd like you to consider this morning.

It's the table in your home.
How many of you own a table?
Not a trick question.
How many of you own a table?

Good.
Here's what I would like you to do with that table.

Sometime later today, sit down at that table.

And make a list of all the ways that Christ has fed you with his grace in your life. All the times he has forgiven you, all the ways that he has given you a gift you could not have given yourself...

I hope you realize, as you are making the list, there is no way you'll remember everything that goes on that list.

And ONLY after you've made that list,
consider what you will do, what decisions you will make,
and how you will live out your faith in Jesus Christ...
with ALL the tables that God has given you.

Amen.