



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

OUR SACRED SPACE: THE TABLE

John 15

April 7, 2019

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Who was around your dinner table growing up? The table that brings back the most memories was my grandparent's dining room table in Princeton, New Jersey. It was a formal Victorian set with chairs you had to sit up straight in. Heaven forbid if you leaned back. I think I cracked a back or two, which of course, instantly meant an hour's punishment on the deacon's bench!

Around the table were my parents, Grandma and Grandpa Rian, my three brothers, and myself. Sunday dinner meant delectable slow-cooked roast beef, potatoes and carrots soaked in the juices, and homemade bread to sop up the gravy. It was divine.

That table is filled with memories. Memories of good food; memories of something special; because it was special food we ate at the table, not everyday food. And it was not everyday conversation. It was celebrations, birthdays, Christmas dinner, and Easter brunch. Time at that table was a special time with the people I loved the most. That is the power of the table.

And just like that table gathered those I loved most, and I bet yours does too. Jesus used the table to gather those closest to him. They weren't family, but they had been through a lot together. Jesus had been their leader from the outset. He was their teacher. But now – around this table – for the first time – they would become something more.

Even though Jesus was their clear superior, he brought them a step closer to him. Up to this point, he had only shown them his professional side: the miracles, the healings, and the speeches were all a part of his day job. But on that night, he would share his heart with them. He needed something more that evening than disciples.

He told them he loved them and, on that night, around that table, he called them friends.

It is around our Communion Table that we become friends. No longer strangers to each other and no longer strangers to God. Just like your dinner table is a uniquely powerful way to connect to those you love in this world, this Communion Table uniquely gives us a place to be with God.

And if our pulpit anchors the Chancel, it is the Table that gathers us together, that makes us one, that places us as one before our Lord. The Table stands between pulpit and choir, and the congregation. We come down and meet in the middle.

The Table is strong and sturdy, so we know that it can take the abuse that dinner conversations sometimes require... that it can be a place where hard news is heard. But it is a table of warm colors, so that, even in the midst of hard news, it is a place of warm fellowship and friendship.

This makes our Table different than our friends at St Paul's or the Advent. Notice that pastors do not bow before the table. For priests, it is a holy place; for us it is a table of fellowship in which Jesus called us friends. Theirs is not a table of friendship, but an altar of sacrifice. It is not the table at which Jesus gathered his disciples in the Upper Room, but it is a place of animal blood sacrifices, in the days of old, at which only the priest may preside. This Table is not solely for the priest; there is a seat for you and you and me. And here we all sit together as one before our Lord.

And just like my grandparents' table, it is a table filled with memories. This is so important that we have inscribed Jesus' words he spoke at that meal to his disciples, "This, do in remembrance of me." Though the phrasing sounds awkward in English it reflects better the emphasis in Jesus' own words. "*This, (all of this)*... the words... the bread... the

wine... the prayers, do it to remember me... to remember this night.”

The memories are filled with hard truths. But because they were around the table of fellowship and friendship they could be heard. Jesus spoke plainly to them that night. He would suffer and die, and they would abandon and betray him.

These were not accusations but the simple truth. Even so, Jesus spoke powerfully of his love for them, “No one has no greater love than to lay his life down for his friends...”

I have sat down at your dinner tables and at funeral meals. There have been stories of loss and of heartache; stories long past but, in the remembering and the retelling, those stories reclaim the fondness and recapture the love.

This Table has the unique power, just as Jesus’ did, to bring people from all different walks of life and to make them one. And this oneness is absolutely critical. So important, in fact, that Paul excoriated the Corinthians when they failed to be as one around the meal.

The Corinthian Christian community had a diverse group of people; one would eat while another went hungry. Paul was furious because it shamed the poor, making them feel lesser before the Lord.

So, the meal is simple. It satisfies in ways other than satiating our hunger. It is simple because of the simple, hard truths Jesus told. But it is all we need to remember and to know him.

This Table must be for all of us, as Jesus said, “Come to me, ALL you who are weary.” All. Everyone.

We pastors often underscore that it is not an exclusive table for Presbyterians, but the Lord’s Table at which all who love him may come. It is a table for Whites, Blacks, and Latinos, for rich and poor, southerners and northerners, gay, straight, Republicans and Democrats. Everyone is welcome. This is a wide table... wide and long to give us the idea there is always room for one more.

As I shared last week, when I was 8 years old there was one less person at the table. When my parents divorced, my dad was no longer there at meal time. For a while his seat seemed quite empty. Just like it must have felt for the disciples with Jesus no longer at the table.

But Jesus’ table is a miraculous one. Many of you know my father lived with me for a time last year because his memory prevented him from living alone. And for the past 8 months he has lived with my brother, Matthew, in California. But a few months ago it was clear it was time for him to leave there as well.

And, while I was on Sabbatical, my brothers and I sat around the dinner table to discuss what we would do next. It was not clear whose table he would be at. None of the options were good. Hard decisions would need to be made. It was heartbreaking. And then, two weeks ago, the phone rang.

It was brother Matt from California. “Guess what?! Pops is getting married!” There would be one more now at the table. At God’s Table there is always room for one more! At 84 years of age, my father, who has not been married for over 40 years is getting married! He has found happiness with Carol, the woman he has loved and who has loved him for the past 20 years!

Soon we will all get together for the wedding. The four boys, my father, Carol, and who knows, maybe even my mother too! All together, at one table, over the joy of marriage and the blessing of a life together. And of God’s power to surprise and amaze and to bring love out of the most trying of circumstances.

That is the power of the table! And it is precisely what happened in the Upper Room.

After Jesus spent all this time speaking of pain, loss, and betrayal he said, “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

And so this Table of fellowship is the place in which we remember and mourn our sins and the sacrifice Jesus made. But that is only the beginning. This Table is also one for a feast. It is a banquet table set for a grand celebration like the world has never know. The eternally heavenly feast, wide enough for the world.

This Table is meant to be a foretaste of the exceeding and eternal joy we will know when we all sit together with our Lord. Amen.