

Deuteronomy 5-6

Build a Bigger Table

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World Communion Sunday is one of my favorite Sundays. In fact, I find that planning worship for this day overstimulates me to the point that I drive everyone around me crazy, as I start every sentence with, “Wouldn’t it be cool if we...?” The ideas and dreams this day represents are at the heart of what I believe about God and what I understand the role of the Church to be. To me, this day is a glimpse of what the kingdom of God is like. I envision a great big table, full of food, with enough places for more people than I’ve ever seen. This week, as I was enjoying that image in my mind, I had a bit of a revelation about the intense feelings I have about that Table.

I’ve always kind of assumed the reason communion is “my thing” is my attachment to that image. The picture of people who don’t look alike, gathering around a table, eating all kinds of bread, laughing and sharing, everyone connected by the bread and by the wine. I love the idea that in God’s kin-dom, there is a table for everyone. But this week I realized that our gathering at the communion table is special to me, not because of something I imagine, but because of what is right in front of me. The Table. You see, unlike a lot of things that go on at churches, tables are something I have always understood.

I mean, let’s face it, some of the things we talk about here, or work so hard to explain, seem a little bit convoluted, even to people who have been part of a church their whole lives. My favorite example of this is when we talk about the Holy Spirit. I think that when an explanation begins with the word “mystery,” that’s a signal that this is not a simple topic and we don’t really know what we are talking about. But tables...

we understand tables. We understand what it's like to sit at a table with people we love, eating, laughing, telling stories. We understand what it's like to sit down to eat a meal with strangers and finish the meal as friends. We can recall holidays spent at tables overflowing with food, listening to great uncle Orville tell the same jokes he told last year and the year before. And we remember the first time we sat across a candlelit table with "the one." We understand tables.

More and more, scientists have taken an interest in understanding how spending time gathered around a table for a meal effects us. The results of that research indicate that the time we spend around tables with other people is time well spent. In a recent Washington Post column, health and wellness expert, Dr. Nina Radcliff wrote, "...experts agree—along with the prospect of the eating experience being delicious and enjoyable – gathering around a dining table together has far reaching physical and mental health benefits, for every one of all ages. At the table, we share stories, build upon relationships, learn from each other's mistakes and triumphs; and not only create bonds that define us...but also architect the hallmarks of our wellbeing. In fact, this time benefits every aspect of your wellbeing — emotionally, physically, socially, occupationally, spiritually, intellectually and mentally – which all acts and interacts in a way that contributes to our overall quality of life."

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/apr/14/health-benefits-eating-together/>

So, I wonder...if this is true, if gathering together around tables to eat has all of these health benefits, then how does it impact a person's health to be excluded from such gatherings? What does it do to a person to be excluded from family holiday dinners because of their sexual orientation or gender identity or because of who they love...or even who they voted for? How does eating every meal alone impact senior citizens who live by themselves? What message do we send our

children when we can't put our phones down long enough to eat a meal with them? And last, how are our neighbors affected when they feel excluded from this table...this table we claim was set for us by a God who loves everyone?

Yes, God loves everyone. We spend a lot of time talking about that. We talk a lot about how the world would be different if we responded to God's unconditional love for us by loving God in return. In fact, that is the essence of the covenant God made with God's people. Fortunately for us, God is better at keeping promises than human beings are. For our Jewish siblings, the story of the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt is the primary example of God's love for them. Last week in the sermon, I talked about the remarkable women in the biblical narrative whose courage and creativity protected the Israelite boys, including Moses who was instrumental in that saving act.

Once the Israelites were liberated, Moses was summoned to the top of Mt. Sinai where he was given the Ten Commandments and other laws, all instructions for how God's people were to live together now that they were free. Ironically, as Moses was on the mountain being told, "You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol..." the Israelites were at the base of the mountain dancing around a golden cow, a literary foreshadow of what was to come. That generation of Israelites, the ones who saw God's power on full display in Egypt, the ones whose sandals stayed dry as they crossed through the Red Sea – that generation didn't trust that God would bring them into the Promised Land. For their disbelief and for their repeated rebellions, God vowed they would not enter the Promised Land.

So, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, that generation died off and their children finally arrived at the edge of the Promised Land. Once again, the people were at the base of the mountain and Moses preached for all he was worth, trying to convince

this new generation to get it right, to honor their covenant with God. Part of that sermon, which is most of the book of Deuteronomy, was a reiteration of the Ten Commandments. Following that, in chapter 6, Moses gave what we call the Great Commandment:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

So, there it is again, love God. Love God with every fiber of your being. And tell the children. Tell them every day. Put this on a post-it note on your door so you don't forget. This part of Deuteronomy is called the Shema, which means, "hear." Our Jewish siblings use the Shema as part of their morning and evening prayers, much like many Christians use the Lord's Prayer. The Shema is also part of Jewish high holy days, including Rosh Hashana, which is the Jewish New Year. Here is a prayer based on the Shema, found in the Machzor, the Jewish high holiday prayer book:

*Love God with your mind:
stay curious, open to questions;
marvel at the wonder of what is.

*Love God with your heart:
stay alive to suffering and joy;
yearn for the world that could be.

*Love God with your strength:
open your hands and give;
work for the sake of what ought to be.

We love God by loving what and who God loves. Just as one spouse loves the Chicago Cubs because the other spouse loves them or a parent loves their child's life partner because that's who their child loves, we are called to love who God loves. And God loves everyone, with no exceptions. And that is the heart of the Table.

*The communion table means nothing if everyone who seeks the ways of Love is not included. This Table is for the very young, who are wiggly and giggly, and sometimes a little grumpy. This Table is for the very old, who are patient and reverent, and sometimes a little grumpy. This Table is for people with black skin, white skin, brown skin, it is for people with flesh colored skin. This Table is for all people who speak love in any language and even for the ones whose love language is hard to hear. Each year, our celebration of World Communion Sunday reminds us that we must continually build a bigger table.

This is the adventure we are on together. Sometimes we get it spectacularly right and other times it all goes dreadfully wrong. Along the way, we have discovered, and will continue to rediscover, that real love is hard and making room for everyone at the table sometimes makes us uncomfortable. My heart filled with joy this week when a member of the church shared her memory of a time in the life of DCC, before this building was built, when this community met at the old Excobo building. It happened around Christmas, in worship, during the softest, most beautiful part of the cantata, a young person sent a pop bottle rolling across the "acoustically vibrant," uncarpeted room. About this memory, the person who told me the story said, "It's really the unplanned, unexpected mishaps that add spice to life." She's right and I think it is moments like that when we have the opportunity to live out

the inclusive theology we claim to embrace, the proverbial “practice what we preach.”

Author and progressive pastor, John Pavlovitz, in his book, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*, wrote, “Friends, the heart of the bigger table is the realization that we don’t have to share someone’s experience to respect their road. As we move beyond lazy theology and easy caricatures that seek to remove any gray from people’s lives, we can meet them in that grayness, right where they are, without demanding that they become something else in order to earn proximity to us or to a God who loves them dearly.” It’s a really hard thing for us to imagine, that there is really a place where we can be who we are, even if we consider ourselves “one of the weirdos.” My faith in God is based on believing such a place exists. If there is such a place, it is this Table and it is set for you.

*And that is worth celebrating. Happy World Communion Sunday...you are loved. Amen.