

“Tables”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
7th Sunday of Easter
June 2, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 104: 1, 14-15, 35

¹Bless the Lord, O my soul.

¹⁴You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, ¹⁵and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

³⁵Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 26:26-29

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”



Sermon: “Tables”

If you had never been in a church before; hadn’t grown up raised in the Christian faith and traditions, you might find it a little odd that we have a table right here in the middle of the church. Almost every Protestant Christian church has one in its worship space. They’re so pervasive that most folks just take them for granted. Of course, the reason we have a table here is because we serve communion on it and communion is a regular part of our worship. But communion is at heart, a meal. So, it would be fair to say that we have a dining table in the middle of our worship space. Which is a little odd.

Tables are important in our human experience because so much of importance in our lives happens around them. And that’s reflected in our art and media.

One of Norman Rockwell’s most familiar paintings is *Freedom from Want*¹ which depicts a family gathered around a full thanksgiving dinner table. But I’m more of a TV and movies guy and there has been a lot of table imagery on television over the years.

If you ever watched Seinfeld², then you’ll remember that a significant amount of that show’s nine-year run took place with Jerry and his friends gathered around a table at Monk’s Diner. And it’s the same thing on The Big Bang Theory³ except for them it’s Chinese take-out eaten around Sheldon and Leonard’s coffee table.

Many of your favorite television families shared their daily trials and solved problems while seated around the kitchen table: The Bunkers⁴, Conners⁵, Huxtables⁶, and Barrones⁷ all made dinner time a central part of their life together.

And some of Parks and Recreations⁸ best moments were when Leslie and Ron, philosophical and political polar opposites, bonded over plates of breakfast food at JJ’s Diner.

It’s interesting to me how often TV and movie scenes take place around a table. But as is often the case, art reflects reality. Sitting down at table to share a meal is foundational to the human experience. We need food. We have to eat to survive. And we need other people in our lives for support and nurture. The table is where those two basic needs are met.

Even so, our culture often loses sight of the importance of the communal meal. One report from Stanford University estimates that on average, American’s eat one out of every five meals in their cars.⁹ Food becomes fuel, a utility; something we interact with as briefly as possible that helps us achieve our own version of the American dream. And it’s not entirely by coincidence that we often treat people the same way.

But there is something holy and sacred about slowing the pace of our lives; about hitting the pause button and making time to eat a good meal.

In an article for [The Atlantic](#) entitled *The Importance of Eating Together*, Cody Delistraty notes:

In many countries, mealtime is treated as sacred. In France, for instance, while it is acceptable to eat by oneself, one should never rush a meal. A frenzied salad muncher on the métro invites dirty glares, and employees are given at least an hour for lunch. In many Mexican cities, townspeople will eat together with

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*friends and family in central areas like parks or town squares. In Cambodia, villagers spread out colorful mats and bring food to share with loved ones like a potluck.*¹⁰

Sitting at table, making time for real meals allows us to spend time with friends, family, and sometimes strangers, meeting our bodily and spiritual needs for sustenance; savoring food we enjoy and experiencing the comfort of old relationships and the excitement of new ones. Jesus understood this. That's why most of his teaching and healing is with groups of people. Salvation is not an individual experience and faith is not a solo endeavor. Being with other people created in the image of God, each bearing a small part of that image, is holy.

The Presbyterian Church celebrates two sacraments: Baptism and Communion; neither of which is a solo activity. Both take place within the gathered community. When a child is brought before God or an adult makes a profession of faith, we don't go off to the river alone and we don't sneak into the sanctuary on a Tuesday morning when no one else is here. We baptize right here, within the gathered community, in the context of worship. It's the same with communion.

Every now and then a couple will come to be married and ask that their first act as husband and wife be to take communion. Not everyone in attendance, mind you, just them. And I always have to say, "No." Because *communion* is a *community* activity. There is no single serving size for communion. The Lord's Supper is always served family style. So, no matter who you are, or where you are from; no matter your race, gender, sexuality, or the journey that brought you to this place, all are invited, and all are welcome at God's table.

There is a whole lot of theology in the celebration of communion. In the eating of bread and the drinking of wine or juice we are remembering Jesus' life, death and resurrection as we commemorate his last supper with his disciples. But even the meal Jesus shared with them was itself a Passover meal, eaten in remembrance of the night that God led the Israelites out of Egypt, and toward the promised land. So, the sacrament of communion is rooted in the oldest traditions of our Judeo-Christian faith. And from those beginnings so many generations before you and me gathered in this place today, those sacramental moments have always been grounded in the sharing of food and the presence of fellow travelers.

And so, we begin to see that our practice of the ritual of taking a small piece of bread and pairing it with a dram of grape juice is symbolic of something larger. It reminds us of God's saving acts of grace: in calling a people out of bondage and into a land of promise, in providing a Savior and founding a Kingdom, and in so doing, keeping a promise to those same former slaves. And when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we are also reminded of innumerable grace-filled moments of salvation and redemption and love in our lives.

As Donald McKim writes, "In the Lords Supper we experience a fullness of time in which past, present, and future come together."

First the past: When we break the bread and drink from the cup, we remember Jesus' words to "do so in remembrance of me." In celebrating communion, we remember Jesus' life, death and resurrection and that through them, we have been reconciled to God; that the relationship with God that humans messed-up has been made right.

Second, the present: Jesus says "this cup is a new covenant. When we take communion, we celebrate that God has made a covenant with us; that all of God's promises throughout the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Jesus and that in him we, who are not of the line of Abraham, are welcomed into God's family as well.

And finally, the future: In the Lord's Supper "we proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord *until he comes again.*" As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember the Christ who is represented in those gifts and we recall the promise that he will one day come again at the completion of God's Kingdom. As we eat this meal, we do so looking forward to the day when all of God's children will gather together; when, as the gospel writer Luke said, they "will come from east and west, from north and south," to sit together at table in the Kingdom of God.¹¹

In communion we symbolize and honor the saving acts of God. But our remembrance of those saving acts of God are not bound just to the every-other-month observance of a ritual in worship. The Psalmist writes that God "bring[s] forth food from the earth, ... wine to gladden the human heart, ... and bread to strengthen the human heart." And we remember that the New Testament identifies Jesus as, metaphorically, bread and wine ("This is my body ... this is my blood"). As Professors Ronald Byers writes, "Like bread and wine, Jesus both makes the heart glad and strengthens it, for which we are thankful."¹²

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When we sit down at table and eat together, we glorify God. It may sound strange, but it's true. Because every time we break bread with brothers and sisters, every time we welcome the stranger to our table, every time we carve out space in our daily rush to sit down with others of God's children to share sustenance of our bodies and our souls - it is sacramental time and we honor our God who made and loves us, our Savior who teaches and redeems, and the Holy Spirit who sustains and guides us.

That's why it is so important to come to the table and eat together. Because we not only make ourselves slow down which is better for our bodies, but we also engage with one another which is good for our souls.

That's why it's so important to not only donate to pantries and helping agencies like the Community Resource Center, and the YWCA Family Center Shelter, but to sit down and engage with the people we are serving. Donating food and time to prepare food is utilitarian. Sitting down at table with other people is sacramental.

Giving money for food to a stranger who asks is easy and it is an expression of God's love and of Jesus teaching to share what we have with others. But maybe next time someone asks for help getting something to eat, try this: invite them to join you for lunch. Make it a public place; you *do* need to be careful out there. But while giving money to buy food is gracious, sharing time and meaningful conversation over a meal is sacramental.

Today we will take communion during this worship service. But there is another opportunity to celebrate communion today. The Strawberry Festival luncheon will be in Fellowship Hall right after worship. And that will be a time to gather around the table and eat and grow as a community. We won't say the words of institution or make a ceremony out of it, but that time around the table will be sacramental.

The sacrament of communion reminds us of God's saving acts, of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, and of the Kingdom of God that is here now and yet still coming. But in the act of taking bread and juice, we celebrate and remember that God calls us *together*. Being a disciple is a team sport. In that journey together, we reflect the love of Christ to one another. As we talked about last week, we love one another as Jesus first loved us; and that is sacramental.

In my house growing up, we always ate dinner together as a family. It was certainly an older way of doing things: my father held a paying job and my mother worked keeping a home and raising children. The world was such that a middle-class job was enough to support a family without both parents needing to work as is so often the case today.

But the important part of this story is not who did the cooking, but what happened after that food hit the table and the values that underlay the meal we ate. You see, eating together was important because that was the time we caught up with each other; when we talked about what was going on in school and heard about my parent's work. It's when we held "gripe sessions" and when my parents would sometimes hold forth on the values and mores they believed were important. There was no TV during dinner - smart phones, YouTube and social media were still years away. And we didn't all just eat whenever we were hungry. We waited until everyone was present and we sat down together, asked the blessing, and shared of both the abundance on our table, and the joys and concerns of our lives. It was sacramental.

In our home today, Mary and I try to maintain that same value of the shared meal and the dinnertime conversation. There are some challenges; the world of today is a lot different from the one I grew up in, and with meetings at church and school band concerts and such, the hallowed dinner hour is not always so hallowed.

Yet we try to sit down together as often as possible. And when we do, we hold hands, ask the blessing, and then share about our lives and the world, nurturing our relationship as we sustain our bodies. And it is sacramental.

The table is more than a place to put your stuff. It is at the center of our worship and our lives. It is where we gather to nurture both our bodies and our souls. The sacrament we celebrate at the table is a symbol that calls to mind Jesus and his disciples gathering to eat, and share, and support one another. And when we come together in the same way, with friends and family and strangers to savor good food and to share of our own lives, it too, is sacramental.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

- ¹ Rockwell, Norman. *Freedom from Want*. 1943, Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, MA.
- ² *Seinfeld*. Created by Jerry Seinfeld, and Larry David, performance by Jerry Seinfeld, et al., NBC, 1989-1998.
- ³ *The Big Bang Theory*. Created by Chuck Lorre, and Bill Prady, performance by Johnny Galecki, et al., CBS, 2007-2019.
- ⁴ *All in the Family*. Created by Norman Lear, performance by Carroll O'Connor, et al., CBS, 1971-1979.
- ⁵ *Roseanne*. Created by Roseanne Barr, and Matt Williams, performance by Roseanne Barr, et al., ABC, 1988-1997, 2018.
- ⁶ *The Cosby Show*. Created by Michael Leeson, performance by Bill Cosby, and Phylicia Rashad, NBC, 1984-1992.
- ⁷ *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Created by Phillip Rosenthal, performance by Ray Romano, et al., CBS, 1996-2005.
- ⁸ *Parks and Recreation*. Created by Greg Daniels, and Michael Schur, performance by Amy Poehler, and Nick Offerman, NBC, 2009-2015.
- ⁹ MacKay, Ruth. "What's for Dinner." *Inter*Action*, no. 9, Spring 2008, pp. 2–10, https://news.stanford.edu/news/multi/pdf/multi_9sm.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Delistraty, Cody C. "The Importance of Eating Together." *The Atlantic*, 18 July 2014, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/the-importance-of-eating-together/374256.
- ¹¹ McKim, Donald K. *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith*. Louisville, KY: Geneva, 2003. 83-84. Print.
- ¹² Byars, Ronald P. *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, pg. 183.