

The Table of Love

Sunday, September 10, 2023

Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

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The table of love invites us to a common place of meeting, a place of encountering Christ and each other where we experience communion with God and each other.

In the center of my sister's house was the table which had been our parent's dining room table. This simple, blonde table was part of every home my parents lived in from the time my dad returned from World War II until the late 1980s when it was moved to my brother's home. It has hosted generations of holiday dinners and family gatherings, as well as an untold number of heated Monopoly games, rounds of pinocle, late night homework sessions, and even the occasional family disagreement.

Those were its official duties. In addition, however, the table was a place to hide when I didn't think the adults could see me—although somehow, they always could. It was also the skyline for my imagination, a high-soaring skyscraper where spacemen would land their rockets, and the buildings where the people who drove my Matchbox cars would go to work. A table can be so many things – it is a place where people and ideas converge, a symbol of communion with Christ and each other, a place where young gather and older ones recall those who are missing.

According to the family legend, my father and mother purchased their dining room set after World War II with money that dad won playing cards. I did not know this story until after both my parents had died. I guess they were sparing me from having to say anything in case an angry Army buddy of my father's would show up wanting his money back!

For Christians, of course, tables recall the tables where Christ was present during his ministry, breaking bread with his disciples and others he had gathered. There is a particular type of remembering that we associate with the sacrament of communion. In communion we re-enact not only Jesus' last meal with the disciples, but all the meals he shared, and the feast which one day we will share with him again. Communion gives us a way to remember his love. The Greek word "anamnesis," almost completely untranslatable to English, captures this sense of holy remembering, or recalling of Christ's sacrifice during communion. "Do this," Jesus commanded, in "remembrance," or

anamnesis of me. In a real sense, what Christians do when we gather around tables is to remember what God has done in the past, present, and even future.

“Come to the table,” our invitation for September, is a reminder that God calls us here not only to receive Christ, but to learn what it means to live with love. When we gather with each other around Christ’s table, we not only experience God’s love being poured into our lives, but we also remember that we are called to enact that love. Communion is never a privatized, individual act. It is always a sign of our participation in the broader family of God.

Of course, family is a loaded term! Anyone who has ever endured a long road trip in a van packed with siblings or who has listened to countless stories from your weird aunt knows that the fibers of family life can often scratch or itch. I can’t imagine it was any easier centuries ago for the earliest Christians. There’s no doubt that the families who heard Paul’s words were wrestling with the basic struggles any family has ever faced: how to survive being together. We know that two basic forces are at work in any family – the need to be separate and the need to be close. At the heart of any family is the struggle to balance being alone, standing on one’s two feet with being close, together, hand in hand. Our almost two-year-old granddaughter is a perfect example: her favorite words at the moment are “No-no-no-no,” exercised with exaggerated hand motions, and “momma...momma...momma..”

Paul’s families in Rome were struggling as well. It is clear from the list of instructions that Paul gave them that they were unsure of how to stay related to each other. We’re unsure what the conflicts were about: maybe one group wanted all sprinkled donuts on Sunday while the other group wanted chocolate donuts. More seriously, perhaps it has something to do with someone owing a debt – which gives Paul the impetus to say that the only thing Christians ought to owe to each other is a debt of love.

“Owe no one anything,” Paul wrote, “except to love one another.”

At that point, someone in the group might have recalled Jesus’ words for addressing conflict. While we have no record of Jesus sitting through a hotly contested congregational meeting or attending a tempers-flared denominational debate, it seems he does know something about the proclivity of humans to act poorly in community. Whatever caused this debate, the groups are divided into factions. No one is loving the way Jesus intends. Harsh resentment has become fossilized. The forces of separation vs. togetherness are working overtime.

He offers an alternative shaped by the cross, yet this is a demanding way of faith because it calls us to pay attention, to listen, and to act with humility. The cross-shaped community is marked by reconciliation, forgiveness, and inclusion. It is shaped by child-like humility (18:4), and a wide-eyed awareness of pitfalls and occasions for stumbling (18:7).

We live in contentious times. The political lines that were drawn so tightly have only hardened. The divisions are deep. I was intrigued by the words of a political consultant who said recently the majority of our national conversations could be summed up by these questions: “Who do you hate? Hey, who hates you? Those are the motivating forces right now.”¹

In other words, conflict is going to happen. It might even be healthy. But it is going to require opening ourselves with humility and trust. That is especially true when conflicts spill over into everyday life.

Jesus’ words in Matthew, perhaps a reflection of the earliest Christian community’s own struggles with conflict, invite disciples to consider pathways of peace. Coupled with Paul’s admonition to “owe no one anything, except to love one another,” these texts exhort Christians to create communities of loving trust and mutual accountability. Such community, notes Warren Carter, is commanded to enact Jesus’ own prayer “if this is how it is in heaven,” Carter writes, “so it must be among disciples on earth.”²

My first lessons in church conflict happened back in the 1970s, long before I ever considered attending seminary. I was in middle school, sitting between my parents on a hot summer Sunday. We had rounded the corner of worship, and were headed toward the final hymn. All that separated me from my cup of tepid church Kool-Aid was the final song.

In a nod to church members who wanted more contemporary-sounding music, the pastor had chosen a song not found in our regular hymnal. Instead, we were directed to sing Kurt Kaiser’s 1969 song, “Pass It On.” Having sung that at countless campfires, I was

¹ See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/14/us/politics/2024-trump-biden-rematch.html>

² Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, vol. 204, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 365.

intrigued by how my parents might react. I gathered it would not have been among my mother's favorites, but both mom and dad sang along without objection.

Until, however, a barefooted young man stood up on a pew behind us and shouted, "Praise God" as we were singing, "I'll shout it from the mountain tops..." Some, especially those who saw themselves as harbingers of a neo-Pentecostal expression of faith, were elated. Others, including my staunch Presbyterian parents, were mortified. (I'd like to think it was the bare feet that really pushed them over the edge, especially since I had always liked "Pass It On.")

The fault-lines of conflict were immediately apparent. Two groups formed on the patio during coffee time that morning: a pro "praise song" group, and traditionalists who preferred hymns (and the wearing of shoes). Eventually, those fault lines gave way to deeper fissures of theology and debates over congregational culture. The resulting conflict prompted hurt feelings, departures of prominent members, and years of distrust.

Interestingly, many of those who loved quoting scripture never mentioned Jesus' words about listening to those with whom you disagree. (To their credit, I did see my parents and their friends reach out to others who did not share their viewpoints). Jesus points us away from hyper partisanship. The way of the cross resists hatred and overcomes evil. It does no wrong to neighbors. It shuns evils like angry partisanship behavior and white supremacy.

It dares to trust that where two or more are gathered, no matter what sort of donuts are served, Christ will be in our midst. Amen.