

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

What a strange scripture reading from Luke. Yes? It pairs one of the best known, and most beloved of Jesus' sayings with a little-known, and rather troubling parable. The saying about mustard seeds and faith has been so influential over the years that various outreach efforts have been named after it. There's the Mustard Seed of Central Florida, which distributes furniture and clothing to those in need; The Mustard Seed Foundation of Dayton, which addresses the concerns of pregnant teenagers; The Mustard Seed Education Foundation, which provides scholarships for disadvantaged youth; just plain Mustard Seed, Inc., which helps out adults with developmental disabilities, and on and on and on. Pages and pages on Google. Everybody, it seems, likes the idea of taking a little faith, and watching it grow.

But the parable about slaves and masters? That's another matter. We are very uncomfortable with the fact that Jesus doesn't condemn the institution of slavery here. As one scholar notes, "[The parable] makes no comment on the slave system or the master/slave relationship." (FTW, 143) Does that mean Jesus approved of slavery? I don't think so. Despite the many ways this parable was misused by nineteenth-century preachers in the South in defense of the institution of slavery, Jesus is simply using it as an illustration, an example. All his listeners in that ancient world would have known that being a slave meant doing whatever your master commanded, even if it meant preparing and serving supper after a full day's work in the field before getting a chance to pull up to the table yourself. That is one's duty as a slave, to obey the master. And you disciples, Jesus is saying, your duty is to obey God.

But that's not just aimed at Peter and James, Mary, John and the rest of those first century followers of Jesus, it is also aimed at you and me, the latter day disciples of Jesus. It is your duty and mine, to obey God. And elsewhere Jesus makes it very clear what it means to obey God. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," he says elsewhere in Luke, "and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27)

And what does neighbor mean? The guy next door who you wave to on your way to work? The woman across the street who is part of your kids' carpool? Well, yes, but your neighborhood stretches far beyond your front yard. In fact, every single human being is to be considered your neighbor. The folks you know and like, those who are a lot like you, and people you've never met, even those you can't abide. You are to love them the same way as you would want others to love you. That's what it means to love your neighbor. And that is what you and I are supposed to be doing--because that is what God commands. Because everybody has a place at God's table. Everybody.

And that's why we celebrate World Communion Sunday. It is to remind us of the fact that we are to make sure everyone knows they have a place at God's table. We are to welcome them with open arms. We are to pull back a chair and say, here you go, friend, make yourself at home. Dinner will be served shortly, meanwhile, enjoy the conversation.

Not that it always happens that way. Over the years Linda and I served as foster parents--over time we had thirteen different foster children. One of them was a little boy who had been born with a terminal illness called pseudo-obstruction syndrome. His name was Jeremy, and because of his malady, he could not eat. All his nutrition came to him through tubing that pumped TPN into his system.

Jeremy spent the first months of his life in the hospital, but eventually he was sent home with his eighteen-year-old mother to our house, both of them considered our foster children. He had nursing care round the clock, and was a candidate for a five organ transplant. But it never happened, for just shy of his first birthday, his little body gave out.

Jeremy's mother was Roman Catholic. And though She wasn't a practicing Catholic, she wanted Jeremy to have a proper funeral mass. So, I made arrangements with the pastor of the local Roman Catholic Church for the service. Very graciously he invited me to participate, which I did, offering a homily based on the story in the gospels where Jesus welcomes the children. "Let the little ones come to me," he tells those who would have kept them away.

But as we waited in our robes for the mass to begin my Catholic colleague and friend took me aside, and apologized in advance. "I'm sorry," he said, "but you won't be able to participate in the Eucharist." Due to Roman Catholic doctrine and practice, I would not be able to take the bread and wine because I am not a Catholic myself. I appreciated his reminding me of something I already knew, and felt badly for him as he had to enforce a rule he didn't fully agree with, but though he did his very best to help me feel welcome in that service, that simple act of exclusion created a space, a distance, which was hard to ignore. Linda and I, Jeremy's foster parents for most of his short life, had no place at the table.

When I was a boy my parents owned a long cherry wood dining room table--six feet long by three feet wide. They had had it custom made so that all six of us could easily fit around it for meals. And so, we did. Mom and Dad at either end, and then the four of us kids sat two of us on each side.

When I was thirteen or so we all moved into a one-bedroom apartment, where we would live throughout my years in high school. The front room of the house was a combined living room-bedroom and dining room. And in order for that long table to fit, it had to be placed up against one of the walls, with just the ends of it and one side available for seating. Needless to say, it was bit more cramped, and we managed to make it work. Mom and Dad were still

at the two ends, but the four kids were arrayed along that one exposed side. But cramped as it was, room was made for all. Everyone had their place at the table. In fact, over the years, the finish on that side got completely worn off, and until it was refinished a few years ago, you could tell exactly where everyone had sat based on the wear marks.

My parents made the necessary adjustments to make sure we all had a place to sit and eat. They made sure despite our tight living quarters and diminished financial situation, we all were assured that we were loved, that we had a place not just at the table but also in their hearts. And so, ribbons still got tied to each of our own chairs on our respective birthdays, desserts were doled out with no preference given based on age or gender, we laughed together at the many puns were cracked around the board, and more meals than I can remember were shared. That table served--and to a certain extent still serves--as a symbol of welcome for our family. And so it should be for the communion table. It should be a symbol, a reminder, of the simple fact that there is a place at God's table, a place in God's heart, for everyone.

Here at Sanibel Congregational United Church of Christ we practice what's known as an open table. That means that anyone who wants to receive communion is welcome to do so. You don't have to have a reservation; you don't need to have been confirmed or even baptized. You don't need to be a member of our church or our denomination. You don't have to look like us, or talk like us, or even believe like us. You just have to want to be here.

We practice an open table as a reminder that we are called to love our neighbors as we would want to be loved. Imagine showing up at a friend's home and being told, sorry, there's no room for you at the table, not enough supper to go around, you'll just have to sit and watch us eat. That's what a closed table--one where some folks can participate while others can't--feel like.

But that's not what we are supposed to do. Yes, we may be a bit cramped at times. We may need to shove the table up against a wall and crowd in on one side. We may need to set aside our doctrinal fine points, we may need look beyond our many differences to discover our commonalities, but whatever the case, we are called to pull out a chair, and welcome one another to the feast. For in God's realm there is a place at the table for everyone. No holds barred. Everyone.

Amen

John H. Danner

