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A Call to the Table

Maurice Wallace

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent his servants to call those who had [previously] been invited to the wedding feast, but they refused to come. Then he sent out some other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, ‘Look, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fattened calves are butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.’” *Matthew 22: 2-4*

“I have a dream that one day... the sons [and daughters] of former slaves and the sons [and daughters] of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” *MLK, “I Have a Dream”*

I.

Aetna and Willis Bradley have been warm friends to my wife, Pam, and me for almost forty years. When we met them, we were homesick undergraduates from Baltimore living in St. Louis. They were a few years older, just getting started as a young family. Though we married and moved away, and they moved, too—a few times—they have been among our biggest supporters, consistently, for a very long time.

A couple of weeks ago, I took off from LaGuardia to visit Willis and Aetna in Davenport, Florida where they retired. Aetna had called a few days earlier to give me the heartbreaking news she was in home-hospice care, and though I was confident that she was in good hands, instantly I felt I had to see her. It had been more than a couple years (*Thanks for nothing, COVID 19*), and seeing as Aetna had been to me for 37 years—I counted—something like a surrogate mom and an older sister all rolled into one, it was important that I see her quickly. I wanted to see them both of course, Willis and Aetna. But I needed to *lay eyes* on Aetna.

Now, I expected to find Aetna low when I touched down in Orlando. And in a physical sense, I suppose she was. Quite low. But nothing prepared me for how positively glowing she'd be even at

her lowest moment, physically speaking. I mean there she was, sitting up in her bed, tastefully bonneted, thinner than the last time I saw her, for sure, but still somehow beaming. Beaming. I don't think I have *seen* glory attach itself to a mortal being so vividly and unmistakably.

Now, I had gone to Florida to lay eyes on Aetna, hoping that my presence might lift her some. But I had distinct feeling heading out of the front door and back to the airport a little later, that I was one who'd been lifted. That, despite all my assumptions about who was low—Aetna—and who was whole—me—it was Aetna who had laid her eyes *on me*. Sending me back home to Pam and our family with the gift of knowing how deeply she cared for us.

II.

Perhaps, it was the marvel of that experience sitting with Aetna and Willis, but especially Aetna, that made me especially sensitive to a sign I came upon even more recently in front of a church on Madison Avenue a little further uptown. The sign announced a free dinner that the church was to host, a public one extended as I recall “to anyone in need.” Dinner. Not a brown-bag lunch prepared to-go, but a full out dinner. A sit-down affair intended, it seems, to not only satisfy the stomach but to dignify the invited with—well—fellowship. With a different—maybe deeper—sense of community. With table-talk and conversation.

Only hours after laying eyes on Aetna, I saw that sign announcing supper for “anyone in need” and suddenly I realized—Aetna's grace and strength and good humor in suffering *made* me realize—that “anyone in need” included me. Perhaps not in the sense that I was at risk of not having dinner that day, but needy in the sense that her bedridden witness to faith somehow fed me. Nourished me. Invigorated my soul. Until then, I hardly knew the extent of my own need for the grace of others I didn't imagine had grace to give (being so low, I mean).

III.

Still, if I'm honest, I probably won't attend the dinner on Madison Ave, where I suspect I would be well, if differently, fed by other Aetnas.

In spite of what I think I know. About the human need for more humanizing encounters. About the inescapable network of mutuality we are called to honor when we are called to the table. Any table.

The conference table as much as the dinner table. The tables of brotherhood and sisterhood. The national table and the global table. The local table and the tables of justice and freedom.

In spite of what I think I know about these tables, and how what is *said* there, as much as what is *served* there—how what is *felt* there as much as what one is *fed* there—is sacramental, too.

In spite of what I know I know about how the human-to-human encounter, the fellowship between like and unlike classes of men, about how my listening to the other guy's story for a change—just *listening*—dignifies me at the same time, rehumanizes me as I see myself reflected in his eyes (maybe), his story (if I try), his triumph (if he lasts), his survival (for sure).

In spite of being fairly certain that at the root of our social and political strife—the chronic condition of our racism, ethnic prejudices and other xenophobias—is a system error, a breakdown—no, a refusal—of empathy, for which the intimacy of the table is our only antidote and our only hope.

Still, I probably won't attend the dinner on Madison Ave. Not because I'm not one of the invited ones. I am, though I often I forget I am. But I suppose I'm a little proud, to be perfectly honest. Reluctant to disclose that I'm needy too. Funny, how that works, isn't it? How challenging it is for some of us to accept our own limited humanity, the truth of our need to see others so that we can see who we are, or might be if we are brave enough to look and listen and imagine something else both more and less than this?

(If I discovered anything sitting at Aetna's bedside a few days ago, chatting and chopping it up, I discovered that even if Aetna was happy to see me, much to my surprise I *needed* to see Aetna more. *My soul is a witness.*)

Let me close now by acknowledging more explicitly the matter that inspired this generous invitation to me to participate in the worship at St. Bart's today. On the afternoon of August 28, 1963, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. extended to the world a stirring invitation of his own—this one to the table of brotherhood. He issued it from a heavily wired platform built onto the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. I recall that invitation today with the benedictory hope that every new dinner

invitation you shall receive, formal or casual, brings King's table to mind. In his name, with his legacy before and behind us, I am urging you to join us for the great supper of human togetherness. The table is post-racial, ecumenical, colorful, post-partisan, perhaps even queer. The table is where beloved community begins. There is no beloved community without the table. The table is not merely a symbol; it's a place. A public place. A meeting place. Like a park bench. Sometimes a little less public. Not much more than a chair set down by the bedside of a beautiful friend.

Imagine if we saw coming to the table as a sacrament, not in the sense of a religious obligation, but as an everyday opportunity for grace.

To come to the table. To give out of a perceived lack only to discover that we had more than we ever thought.

Imagine if New York was less vertical and we started building horizontal.

Come over here. Where the table is spread and the feast of the Lord is going on.

There's an old African American congregational song, mostly lost to cultural memory now, but it used to be heard in buoyant Black Baptist and Pentecostal congregations often enough: "Come on in, where the table is spread and the feast of the Lord is going on. Joy, over here where the table is spread and the feast of the Lord is going on. Love over here where the table is spread...And so on. In this song cycle, the blessings of the table are endless, it seems. And yet there's never any mention of the food at this feast, just good life-affirming feeling, where the feast of the Lord is going on."