

PEOPLE OF THE TABLE

The Table Principle

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Introduction to the Scripture

On this Mother's Day, it seems very appropriate that we continue to reflect together on what it takes to grow a great family. Whether our family consists of the people in our home, the ones we visit now and then, or a small group of close friends, God gives us in the Bible some powerful principles which, when practiced, can make those circles even more life-giving places.

Great families are always founded first and foremost on the Covenant Principle. They are made up of people committed to being there for one another, to keep showing up for one another, after the example of Jesus Christ himself. Even when his disciples slept on the family job, Christ remained faithful to them, and especially at their midnight hour. How do you see such a covenant expressing itself in your family life?

As we explored last week, great families also show that they understand the Body Principle. They see themselves not as a collection of individuals but as a single unit. They take their own gifts seriously. They value the gifts of others highly. And they all use and unite those gifts for the sake of the common good with a result that is simply incredible.

Alongside of those two investments, great families also understand what I want to call the Table Principle. This is the vision we find in Acts chapter 2, verses 40-47. To bring this passage alive in a fresh way this morning, let's read it from Eugene Peterson's marvelous translation of the text. We'll read it responsively together... [Scripture Lesson is read]

My Mother's Table

Of all the many things my mother said to me through the years, few still reverberate so significantly in me as that phrase I heard thousands of times: *"It's time to come to the table!"* The mealtime ritual was very important in our family's life. If we were out playing with our friends, we had better come running. If we were immersed in the cartoon show, the T.V. had to go off. If we were at our homework, the pencil had to be put down. There was a TIME when we came to the table.

I can't say that I was always eager to answer that call. If I had been successful in recently wheedling a snack out of my friends' parents or sneaking one out of the cabinet at home, it was not hunger that got me running. If I was deep in some pleasure or project of my own, it was not desire for family fellowship that got me up and going. More often than not, it was an acquired discipline that made me move. It was because if we didn't come to the table there was a very unhappy Mom to deal with and if there is

one cardinal rule everybody learns in family life: “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy!”

My mother placed a very high value on rules and rhythms, on rituals of various kinds. There was a place that laundry had to go and a consistent time when we had to go to bed. There was a reliable way that birthdays got observed and holidays got celebrated and all of us in the family came to learn those ways. In time, we came to demand those rituals! If mom didn’t tuck us in and say “*Sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite, and if they do then bite them back*”... If she didn’t make that signature lamb at Easter and bring out the ice-cream molds at Thanksgiving, then we’d all holler like the Earth had slipped off its axis.

The Role of Rituals

My mom had to work hard to establish these rituals. She got resistance from us all. She paddled upstream against the clamor and chaos of an American culture moving rapidly toward a far “freer” and less “traditional” life, but she insisted on creating predictable points of stability and civility in our lives. There were meals and manners and methods of doing things that certainly weren’t the only way but they became our way. Those rituals created a sense of safety, and built an inner order, and imbedded some very important values that helped us turn out OK in life – at least so far!

Many years ago, the famous French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, conducted landmark research on the role that rituals play in fostering the health of social institutions, and particularly the pre-eminent one – the human family. Durkheim found that families with consistent rituals tended to have significantly stronger marriages and healthier children than those where ritual was absent or rarely observed. He asserted that such rituals strengthen a circle in four important ways.

First, rituals “*enhance the solidarity of the group*” – the feeling of stability and connectedness experienced by group members. Secondly, rituals “*build loyalty to the values of the group*” – they en flesh what the family believes. Thirdly, rituals “*communicate the values of the group to new members*” – they both proclaim and train others in the family’s core values. And finally, meaningful rituals “*create a euphoric sense of well-being for the members of the group.*”¹ Provided they are healthy rituals, these patterns help to form great families.

The Christian Family Table

Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the experience of the first Christian family, the one we meet on the day of Pentecost in the Book of Acts chapter 2. It can’t have been any easier *then* than it is *now* to establish the patterns that family did. First century Palestine was a tumultuous place to live. The wealth of the Roman Empire had spawned a level of consumer materialism never before seen in history. Immigration and employment practices were in massive flux, as now even the once *Jewish* Jerusalem was a place where – as Acts 2:9-11 describes it – “**Parthians, Medes and Elamites;**

residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,” and at least ten other hard-to-pronounce countries, all came and competed creating increasing complexity and social stress. Politicians were at each other’s throats. Wars were being fought. Life swirled fast and furious. People wondered sometimes, as the Apostle Peter voiced in Acts 2:40, how do we **“get out of this sick and stupid culture,”** or how do we transform it? Sound familiar at all?

And yet, somehow, amidst this environment, the God of Love built an absolutely incredible family -- an imperfect one for sure -- but one God has used to transform cultures at their sick and stupid places, and to bless so many people, down to many of us who stand here today. As near as I can figure it there were FOUR PARTICULAR RITUALS the first followers of Jesus observed that became, in a sense, like the four legs of the Christian Family Table – each worth considering, I think.

ONE leg of the first Christian Family Table was the simple ritual of Consistent Meals. Verse 42 says: **“They committed themselves to the life together, the common meal.”** Verse 46 says: **“They followed a daily discipline of meals at home.”** How do you see that practice working itself out in your life? Early in our marriage, my wife said: “Let’s make sure we eat dinner together much more often than not. Let’s turn off the T.V. Let’s not answer the phone. Let’s always eat by candlelight.” And that has remained a high value in our family ever since. We’re not perfect at it, by any stretch. Work and school and the sports make it hard, but we really work at it nonetheless.

Did you know that research shows a positive relationship between frequent family dinners and positive teen behavioral outcomes? Teens who regularly have meals with their family are less likely to get into fights, think about suicide, drink or use drugs? They are more likely to have later-initiation of sexual activity, and better academic performance than teens who do not.² It works in other kinds of families too. Diane Gibbons and Sherri Adams on our staff, Carol Dill and Laurie Barton in our Board of Elders, are among the mother’s voices who regularly call the leaders of our church to “Come to the Table” together. There’s no doubt, we grow better as a family each time we do.

In a sense Jesus founded his Church at a Table. He told us that we could commune with God and each other in the breaking of the bread.³ So how are consistent meals going in your family? If yours is like mine, sometimes it is a fight to get everyone to the table or keep them at the table, but this ritual is a God-ordained one, and it helps grow greater families.

The Book of Acts makes clear that the SECOND leg of the Christian Family Table was Biblical Teaching. **“They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles,”** verse 42 declares. As important as physical food is, the early Christians understood what Jesus taught, that **“human beings don’t fully live by eating bread alone but by feeding on the Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”**⁴ How deeply is this value ritualized in your family’s life? It occurs to me that to have my children baptized and then not immerse them in Sunday School or worship weekly, is like giving them a

drink of holy water at six-months old and then denying them food. To not create the discipline that my teenager go to some Christian youth group is like saying, it's OK that you don't eat any protein, fruits, and vegetables; what tastes good to you is the most important thing. You'll probably get all the spiritual truth you need from college and the media.

I do know families that do a tremendously good job of feeding one another spiritually at home. I know homes where there is such a solid pattern of family Bible study and devotions that the church's programs are just dessert. I've worked at home at helping my boys memorize passages of Scripture, read Bible stories, learn the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. But Amy and I long to see them become great disciples, great human beings. So, as long as they're living with us, it seems the loving thing to require them to eat at several Christian tables.

Did you notice what the third leg of the original Christian Family Table was? It was Need-Meeting. One of the most important rituals a Christian family can establish is *any discipline* that helps kids learn the difference between "wants" and "needs." Is it any secret to you that kids today are growing up in the midst of the most massive cultural "want-generating" machine of all time? How do we help them not become the victims of that machine? How do we help each other?

One way I can think of is to reflect at mealtimes about the needs of others and how your household could be part of meeting them. Go eat with a missionary or some other servant whose life is focused on meeting more primary needs. Walk through a less glamorous part of the city trying to notice what needs are not being met here. Get involved in a service project with your spouse, children, or friends. When a child scoops most of the contents of the best dinner dish onto his plate, ask him how he imagines that others at the table are going to get their needs met. This may sound like a recipe for depriving our kids, but it isn't. It is how we lead them, and maybe ourselves, into the Great Life. Acts 2:44 says of the first Christian Family that **"all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met."** How great a life is your family aiming for?

The FOURTH and final leg of the Christian Table was Prayer and Praise. Verse 42 declares that Jesus' family **"committed themselves to... the prayers."** Verse 46 says that **"every meal [was] a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God."** When was the last time you began a meal together by simply going around the table and sharing one cause for celebration, one source of joy, one reason to praise God right now? Have you ever tried joining your hands in the middle of the table or room, saying the Lord's Prayer, then throwing your hands up and shouting "A-a-a-men!" If you or other family members don't find it easy to come up with the words to pray, could you get hold of a book of someone else's prayers and use those till you find that prayer starts forming on your own lips? The family that prays and praises together stays together. What's your ritual?

Tony Campolo writes: “There are so few things that can be controlled in a child’s life these days that parents who neglect the use of ritual have neglected one of the few available instruments for building emotional security and loyalty to family values. When parents ask me how they can help their children overcome their insecurities... When they ask me how they can get their children to embrace the right kind of behavior patterns... When parents ask how they can give their children good feelings about themselves, I say, ‘Ritual!’”

Thank you to my mother, my children’s mom, and all of you others who keep growing greater families because you understand this already. May all our households keep growing in these “**daily disciplines**” until there is such a luminous quality to Christian families that it will be said of us as Acts 2 tells us it was of that first community of Christ-followers long ago: “**People in general liked what they saw**” in these people. “**[And] every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.**”

PEOPLE OF THE TABLE

A Reflection Guide on Practicing the Table Principle

1. When you hear the word “ritual” what does it bring to mind for you? What is negative about the word? What seems positive?
2. Take a moment to quietly and honestly assess what’s going on in your family’s life. Then, on a scale of 1 to 5, make a note of how strong you feel each of these “Legs of the Family Table” are for you and yours.

(Scale: 1 = The leg is missing..... 5 = This leg is very strong)

- We [I] consistently share meals.
- We are [I am] well-fed at home and beyond with biblical teaching.
- We [I] maintain a need-meeting vs. a want-satisfying focus.
- We [I] have a regular practice of prayer and praise.

4. Which of these legs do you feel a particular desire right now to strengthen? Why?
5. What might be a step(s) you could take to move forward with that desire? Are there any ideas shared in the sermon or by others that would be helpful to you?
6. Complete the following sentence and let this be your prayer to God in the days ahead: “Lord God, please...

Acts 2:40-47 (The Message)

[The Apostle Peter] went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over, "Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!" ⁴¹*That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up.* ⁴²*They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.* ⁴³*Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles!* ⁴⁴*And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common.* ⁴⁵*They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.* ⁴⁶*They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful,* ⁴⁷*as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.*

¹ Anthony Campolo, *Who Switched the Price Tags: A Search for Values in a Mixed-Up World* (Word Books: 1986), pp. 128-29.

² <http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org/indicators/96FamilyMeals.cfm>

³ Luke 22:19; Matthew 14:15-21; Luke 24:30-35

⁴ Matthew 4:4; John 34:4