

Around the Table  
Mark 10:35-45  
October 7, 2018  
World Communion Sunday  
Leslie A. Klingensmith

I recently started reading *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah's memoir about growing up as a mixed race child in South Africa. You may know Trevor Noah from his work on the *Daily Show* – he's an actor and comedian, but also shows himself in his book to be a fine writer. Noah was born in 1984 a few years before apartheid, the codified system of racial separation that had ruled South Africa since the 1940s. Trevor Noah's mother is a black South African of the Xhosa tribe, and his father is Swiss. So, Trevor Noah's father was not even a citizen of South Africa, but the relationship his parents had was illegal under apartheid regulations. He was, literally, born a crime.

Trevor Noah writes now about the cognitive dissonance of being part white when all of his family was black. His father was marginally in his life, but Trevor and his mother could not live with him, as it was against the law. Most of his Trevor's early childhood was spent in Soweto, a black township where almost everyone looked the same. On the one hand, there were things about life that were hard for Trevor. He rarely was allowed to play outside, for example, because if he was seen, it would be clear that his parents had had relations, and they could be arrested. Trevor himself could have been shipped off to an orphanage had his parents been caught in their crime. Once he and his mother moved to Soweto, which happened to be around the same time that Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, and the structure of apartheid began to crumble, Trevor felt a little safer. But still, he was a curiosity, and felt like he didn't exactly fit in anywhere.

One of the things that troubles Trevor Noah even now was the privilege that was

bestowed on him, even by the black community in Soweto, because he was part white. Racism and racial privilege were so ingrained in the consciousness of South Africans that Trevor benefited from it before he really even knew what race was or what it meant to be “mixed.” If Trevor was playing with his cousins, who were black, and they did something naughty, the black children would be punished and Trevor wasn’t. If Trevor attended a funeral, a very scripted and elaborate affair in South African culture, he was always invited to sit with the family, whether he knew the deceased or not. When he started at a government school at age 11, he was automatically placed in the “A” class, which was supposedly the smartest kids. Trevor quickly realized that all the kids in the A class were white, except for him and one child from India. All of the kids in the “B” class were black. And that was *after* apartheid was officially over.

We can see from Trevor Noah’s story that pride of place and the conferring of dignity because of arbitrary characteristics still happens in our world. As a young child, Trevor Noah didn’t fully understand all the background as to why he was given such an elevated place in the society in which he lived. He remembers his grandmother getting angry when he and two of his cousins stole cookies that she had baked without asking. She forbade the other two kids from having any more, but Trevor could have all he wanted. “I was too young to understand,” Noah writes now. “And even if I had understood, I doubt I would have had the words to call my grandmother out on her racism. I was five years old. I ate the cookies.”

“What’s in it for me?” That’s the attitude I pick up on from James and John as they approach Jesus. They have agreed to serve and follow Jesus, but their motives are not entirely spiritual or altruistic. Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” they say. James and John are looking for something else besides spiritual fulfillment, something more earthbound, if you will. That may just be part of being mortal – due to the inherent brokenness

and sinfulness of humankind, I'm not sure anyone can do anything with motives that are entirely pure. But, we also are not normally as blatant in our self-interest and James and John are in this moment. Experiences like Trevor Noah's show us how deeply ingrained in us our desire for recognition is.

'What is it you want me to do for you?' Jesus asks. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Remember when we were little kids and would go to birthday parties and everyone would argue about who got to sit next to the honoree? That's what this reminds me of. In the culture of the times, sitting next to a prestigious person was a way of gaining prestige yourself. Even though James and John are misguided in their request, they at least know that Jesus is the real deal. They aren't asking to sit next to an earthly political leader, or a celebrity. They want to demonstrate that they are close to Christ, that they share his way of looking at the world and his concern for people who are outcast and oppressed. They probably also want to bask in his reflected glory, but perhaps we can forgive them for that.

Jesus' answer to their request brings James and John back to reality quickly. "You do not know what you are asking," he says. Gathering around the table is not about prestige or reflected glory – it is about being willing to endure what Jesus endured for us. Table fellowship is about developing the relationships that can sustain us through suffering. It is about having the courage to risk everything we have, even life itself, to follow where Jesus leads us. Once again, Jesus turns our conceptions upside down. If we are to be truly close to Christ, we have to go where people have the least amount of respect, the least amount of power, the least amount of worth (at least what our short sighted culture would call "worthy"). It's not about having the most celebrated place at the table, it's about seeing to it that *everyone has a place*.

James and John show us that everyone brings their whole self to their relationship with

Jesus, and that's really okay, because Jesus knows how flawed we all are and loves us anyway. We have a responsibility as people who have chosen to serve Christ to pay attention, to work diligently to resolve the inequities of society, and to remember where Jesus' heart truly is. We can forgive a young child for eating the cookies, because he didn't know any better – but we cannot knowingly eat the fruit of privilege when other people are suffering. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke has a line in one of his poems: “setting it all in order is the task we have continually before us.” We are not going to get everything perfectly right, and our own selfishness will inevitably creep into our quest for truth and justice – but that doesn't mean we don't continue to make the effort to set this mess in order.

We gather today, around the table. We celebrate this redemptive sacrament with our sisters and brothers across the world, of every color and culture, of every race and people. We come together to celebrate the truth that we are all God's children, and to recommit ourselves to working toward the day when we make that truth the reality in which we live. The work is not yet done. There are too many who are excluded, who do not have any place at the table, while the few gorge themselves on the abundant food and drink that God has provided.

But not at this table. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is invited. There are no best seats or worst seats – we are all honored guests. We offer our host our humble thanks and praise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

