

Sermon Title: Who Belongs Here?

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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My grandmother's name was Ma-Ma, and there were two tables in her house. One table stood in her dining room, and where it stood, it seemed almost sacred. The tabletop was deeply polished until it shone. The chairs were always pushed in perfectly. The sideboard buffet stood nearby, with dishes and the family silver that came out only on special occasions. Everything matched and was in its proper place around her Dining Table. While it was beautiful, it was often empty. Holiday meals happened there every now and then, but as a little boy, I wondered why anyone would want to sit in such a serious room.

The real family gatherings happened somewhere else. Just off the kitchen, between the washer and dryer, sat a little Formica table. That table was not much to look at. The chrome legs had long since lost their shine, and the edges were chipped. The surface carried more scratches and dents than I could count. But those scratches were our family story. One came from when I drove my tricycle a little too fast and crashed into the side of the table. Another came when my sister spread newspapers across it so she could paint. She thought the paper would protect the table, but it did not. The paint bled through anyway. There were scratches from my mom and her sisters' homework. Dents were on the surface from dropped pots, rings would be left behind by glasses of sweet tea, and marks left by family that no one could even remember anymore.

That table was not perfect, but that table was well-loved. Around that little kitchen table, we laughed until we cried. We listened to stories that somehow became just a little better every time they were told. We ate homemade biscuits, buttered and drizzled with fresh honey. We celebrated birthdays. We grieved our losses. Sometimes we simply sat together in silence because life had hurt someone we loved.

Without anyone ever saying the words aloud, every one of Ma-ma's grandkids learned something around that little Formica table. We would always be offered a place for us there. I never asked Ma-Ma if I was invited. I never wondered if there would be enough food. I never worried whether I was good enough that week. If Ma-Ma was home, there was a place for me. **As children, we learned that we do not earn a seat at the family table. We simply belonged.**

I suspect every one of us has a table like that, where moments of joy or complication, laughter or silence were present. But every table, every single one, answers the same question: **Who belongs here?**

That question matters far more than the wood the table is made of or the china resting on it. Who belongs matters more than the food being served, and certainly long before we ever understand theology. We learn belonging around a table. **Perhaps that is why God's story keeps unfolding around one.**

When Paul writes to the Corinthian church, he's not trying to teach them proper Communion etiquette. He is trying to remind them whose table they are sitting at. The church in Corinth was a congregation of great gifts: passionate, energetic, and growing in numbers. Yet, they were a complete mess. They recognized Christ in the bread, but they failed to recognize Christ in one

another. They could revere the elements yet disregard the unity of the people those elements were meant to complete.

They made a mess of nearly everything, especially the Lord's Supper. The wealthy believers arrived early with baskets full of food, and they ate until they were satisfied. Some even became drunk.

Hours later, the laborers arrived, who were the servants and the slaves. Those who could not simply leave work whenever they wished. By the time they arrived, the meal was nearly over. The wealthy had eaten, and the poor went away from the common meal hungry. The rich celebrated, and the poor watched.

Imagine that scene. The very meal Jesus gave to proclaim God's grace had become another reminder of the world's inequalities. Paul looks at them and says something astonishing, "*When you come together, it is not really the Lord's Supper you eat.*"

Sit with Paul's words for a moment. Yes, they still had the bread and the cup. They still repeated Jesus' words. Yet Paul says, "It is not the Lord's Supper." Why would Paul say that sentence? Because they had forgotten whose table it was. Instead of asking: **Who belongs here?** They had begun asking: **Who deserves to be here?** And those questions do not exist together for Paul.

Every table answers the same question: **Who belongs here?** At Ma-Ma's table, the answer was simple. The table was mostly family and friends. At Corinth, the answer had become something else. Their table was simply people like us. People who arrived first, who had enough means and prestige to come early, and those who mattered. Paul says, "No. You have forgotten the Lord of the Supper."

So, Paul does something remarkable. He does not begin making new rules, but he hands them back a story. "*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...*"

Do we hear those words? Paul said, "Received." Churches do not own this meal. We received it. Every generation receives the same bread, the same cup, the same story, and then hands it to the next. Paul's words are not a clever idea or a committee recommendation; they remind us that this is something handed down from one generation to another. Almost like a grandmother handing down a scarred kitchen table, a treasured family recipe, or an old Bible with names written inside the front cover.

Paul is saying, "This meal remembers us into being." And then he tells them about a surprising, specific night. Not the day Jesus raised Lazarus, nor the time he fed five thousand people. He does not mention Palm Sunday or even Easter morning. Paul says, "The night He was betrayed."

I have thought about that all week. If I had been writing the story, if I knew my betrayal was around the corner, I would have canceled dinner that night. Yet Jesus does not. He gathers His friends. He washes dusty feet. He breaks bread. He pours wine. He gives thanks.

"Take, eat. This is my body." "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Every covenant meal in Scripture creates a community. Sinai created Israel. The Passover renewed Israel. Now this cup creates a people whose deepest identity is no longer rich or poor, Jew or Greek, slave or free, but Christ's own body. We do not come because we have finally become one family. We come because Christ refuses to stop making us one.

And twice, Paul says, “*Do this in remembrance of me.*” Remembrance, in Paul’s Greek, is not simply a thought that flickers through the mind. The Greek word is **anamnesis**, which means a re-membering, a re-joining together, a putting back together of what has been scattered. **Every time this church gathers at this table, Christ is not asking us merely to recall Him.** He is putting us back together as His body, as His family reunion.

On the very night the world is falling apart, Jesus prepares a meal. And then, he looks around the table to find Peter there, Thomas there, James and John there, and the others are there. Remember that Judas is there, too.

Jesus knows exactly what each one of them will do before sunrise. Peter will deny Him. Thomas will doubt Him. The others will run away. Judas will betray Him. And yet, Jesus never removes a chair. Not one chair is removed. **Grace had already set the table.** *(Long pause.)* And that changes everything. Whenever Christ is the Host, the guest list belongs to Him alone.

At Jesus’ table, the answer became beautifully different. Those whom the Abba had given Him – Peter, Thomas, and even Judas – are present. Not because they were worthy, but they were wanted.

**Friends, somewhere along the way, I wonder whose chair I have quietly removed.** Not because Jesus asked me to. Because I decided they did not belong. There are people I find easy to welcome. People who think like me. Worship like me. Agree with me. Make me comfortable. And every time I think the table is full, Jesus quietly pulls out another chair. He says, “Scoot over, Eddie. There’s someone else I would like you to meet.” Our greatest miracle of the Lord’s Table is not that there is a place for me. The greatest miracle is that Jesus gets to decide who sits beside me. Grace had already set the table.

In just a few moments, we will be invited to come to this table. **Notice I said invited. We are not commanded or examined. We are invited to come remembering this is not my table. Nor is it the Session’s table. First Presbyterian does not own this table. This table is Jesus’ own, and our Host has spoken. There is a place for each one of us.**

Not because we have had a particularly good week. Not because our faith is stronger than someone else’s. Not because we have finally gotten our life together.

We are invited because Jesus Christ delights to welcome sinners who know they need grace. So come to the Table. Let us bring our whole life, and the scratches this world has left on our soul.

This table has never been for perfect people but for loved people. And when we come, do not just look for our own place. Look around. Notice whose hand reaches for the same bread. Notice whose cup is filled from the same pitcher. Notice the people Christ has welcomed.

Some are older. Some are younger. Some have walked with Jesus for seventy years. Some are barely learning His name. Some carry never-known joys. Some carry burdens we cannot imagine. Yet here we are: one loaf, one cup, one Lord, one family, and one table.

Paul says it plainly: as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. We eat this meal until He comes because one day faith gives way to sight, and the little tables of earth open into the marriage supper of the Lamb. So, this table is not only memory reaching backward but is the witness reaching forward, straining toward the day our Host returns. Every Communion is practiced in hope.

Because this isn't the whole table. We are only the nearest end of it. This table stretches into eternity, and the heavenly feast includes every tribe, every tongue, and every nation. We are ONE family with one Host and one table. Friends, every chair... every single chair... will be filled by grace.

Looking back, I don't think Ma-Ma ever imagined she was teaching theology to a little child. She was simply making room with every biscuit, every story, and every chair she quietly pulled away from the table. And those actions became God's first whisper to a little boy about a Savior who would spend His whole life making room for one more.

Every table answers the same question: **Who belongs here?** When we leave this table today, may every conversation, every act of mercy, every welcome we extend become another chair Christ pulls out for someone else. So, we are invited to **come**. Because grace has already set the table.