

Look At the Faces Around the Table

From the series: Faces Around the Cross

Text: Luke 5:29

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Having entered this Lenten season around the table of our Lord, I want to point to the fact that table fellowship was the mark of his ministry. Throughout this season we'll be looking at faces around the cross, but first, this morning, let's look at the faces around the table.

In the formalized, ritualized worship of the Christian church, it's not really possible for us to gather around the table. When I was doing my graduate study in The Netherlands, I would, on occasion, go to one of the Dutch churches in the neighborhood. After the Second World War, they had built a lot of churches in The Netherlands and they built them with a lot of space in the front of the nave, and in one of the neighborhood churches that I attended, in the celebration of Communion, the people would literally come forward and gather around tables set in the front of the nave, several pews gathering until all the chairs were filled. They would partake, rise, go back to their pews and the next section would come. They literally took the Communion around the table so that they could look into the faces of one another. Well, that was a cut above what we're able to do, but it still wasn't reflective of the intimacy of table fellowship as we have it in the initiation of this sacrament on the night of Jesus' betrayal. That, of course, was connected with the Passover feast. Israel celebrated annually every spring their deliverance from Egypt, God's liberating act of freedom for them as a people, their founding story. And so, they celebrated annually in the spring the Passover meal, in their respective homes around that roasted lamb.

Jesus took his vision and his ministry into the very heart and center of Israel, in Jerusalem to the Temple, and he did it at the time of Passover so that the culmination of his life and his crucifixion happened at that time of the year. In the night before that inevitable morrow when he would give his life, he gathered with his disciples. Some of the Gospels say it was Passover itself. One of the Gospels says that it was a night prior to Passover, but whatever - it certainly was connected with that Passover celebration. But, there was a deeper connection, I believe, for, in gathering his disciples around the table on that last evening, he was doing what had been characteristic of his ministry.

New Testament scholarship studies of the Gospel today are more and more recognizing that it was table fellowship that was central to the ministry of Jesus. That it was fellowship around the table that was the hallmark of his ministry and that, at table fellowship, Jesus was enacting his message, that it was there, in the midst of that fellowship, that God's presence was experienced, God's living, gracious presence known in the fellowship of the table. It was around the table, looking into one another's eyes that those people experienced the presence of God according to the proclamation of Jesus. Now, this is quite a radical idea, really. Oh, I've said it many times - that table fellowship marked the ministry of Jesus. You can't read the Gospels without coming again and again to a dinner party. Someone has said that in the whole of Jesus' ministry he is either going to dinner or coming from dinner and at one point, in frustration at some of his critics, he said, "You know, there's no way to satisfy you people. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking and you said he has a demon. And I came eating and drinking and you call me a glutton and a wine bibber." Well, I prefer Jesus' style. But, it is true - he was a convivial person. He was always at table, and he would go to anybody's table. He was sort of like Peter. Just invite him to dinner. Because Peter has come to understand that a table finely set with candles, wine, and good bread is a sacrament.

Literally, Jesus incarnated the presence of God at table. We read the story of his call to Levi or Matthew to come follow him, and the first thing that Matthew did was to throw a party for his friends, and of course, the Pharisees who were very strict in their religious observance marked by their separation from all sorts and manner of people, condemned his presence at the party. But, the point that Jesus was making was that his presence at the party was the presence of God which said that God's presence is immediately available to all, to all who would come to table, that there are not distinctions, that one is not to withhold oneself from some people under fear of ritual impurity as though one might become unacceptable to God because one rubbed shoulders with whomever.

But, it wasn't only Matthew's party with the tax collectors, the IRS people, the rather unsavory sort who were working not for their own government, but for an occupying power, who were unclean according to the strictest religious observance because they associated with all kinds of people and were in collaboration with that foreign power - it wasn't only that kind of people with whom Jesus would dine. He also dined at the house of Simon the Pharisee, for example. Of course, on that occasion a lady of the night came in and anointed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Wherever you go in the Gospels, Jesus is at table, and the radical message of Jesus was that the Kingdom of God is dawned. The Kingdom of God is not "up above," the Kingdom of God is not out ahead in the future; the Kingdom of God is here and now. God's presence is present in our presence together. In our intimate connection of table fellowship, God's presence is experienced.

The miracle of Christmas that we celebrate is incarnation. It was in our liturgy this morning - the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And that is the wonder of Christmas. But, as a matter of fact, the incarnation has by the Church been isolated to Jesus, the word become flesh, failing to see that Jesus was called Immanuel, God with us, and that God is not alone in splendid isolation, in some vast beyond. Jesus' very message, the heart of his ministry, the active parable of his life, was that it was at table fellowship where you could look into the eyes of another, that the presence of God was experienced.

That is a radical idea. If that is true, then you don't need priests. Now, you might need a pastor, but you don't need a priest in the sense of having someone mediate that grace of God to you. Some have used the phrase, "the unbrokered presence of God."

The Stock Market broke a record this week but I can't charge into Wall Street myself and make my investments. (After vacation, that's a ludicrous idea, anyway.) But, I need a broker, an agent.

The Church, by and large, cannot live by the radicality of Jesus. The Church has claimed to be a mediating institution and in some parts of Christendom, even the clergy are given a certain indelible stamp, a status that enables them to become the mediators of the grace of God in a degree to which average, garden variety folks like you couldn't do. But, Jesus spoke of the unbrokered presence of God. Jesus said you don't need a priest and you don't need a church and you don't need an institution. Some have said Jesus is a prophet and according to his message and his ministry he was trying to put himself out of business. Now, of course, religion cannot handle that kind of immediacy. Religion tends toward institutionalization and institutionalization tends toward structure, vested interest. The people are more easily managed and controlled, if not manipulated, by a proper religious structure.

Don't you see, historically, that it has been the very religious structures that have blurred the clarity of Jesus' message that there was an immediate presence of God for everyone? Everyone who would open oneself, who would experience in that openness of relationship with another, anyone who with mercy and grace would live justly in relating with brothers and sisters - that one knew immediately the presence of the gracious God. That was really Jesus' message. He said as much, but he enacted it time and time again so that, of course, he became very threatening to the religious institution, and thus, in these Lenten weeks we will follow again that story of his passion and his death. We will look at faces around the cross. But before we do that, on this first Sunday in Lent, we look at faces around the table.

As I said, we can't come around the table, so in this formal setting you'll have to simply look into the eyes of the one on your right hand and on your left. You'll have to look at each other forwards and backwards. You have to experience the presence of God in the presence of one another, where you are in this

arrangement, which doesn't lend itself to the kind of communion that Jesus had in mind. And yet maybe we can get a sense of it.

At the early service I had the privilege of not serving the Eucharist. I was able to sit on the bench, and as the people streamed down the aisle, I looked face-to-face, with face after face, and it was a rather moving experience for me. It gave me goose-bumps. Some I have known for years; some I know more recently; some I know intimately, some I know not so well, but what I knew in a moment as the people came forward, I was able to look into their faces, that it is here that I experience the reality of God. In our early service, the people kneel and, as a rule, I have the privilege to serve the bread or offer the cup face-to-face. A very, very moving experience which I cherish. But, I had the privilege of looking at people and serving them in the early service on an average week and I see them kneeling in prayer. Good things happen at the rail. Yet, I sense that often that is so personal - between the communicant and God.

But, according to Jesus, if you really want a moment with God, look across the table. Look into the eyes of another. Look at the faces around the table. And this is where Jesus was so radical, because there were all sorts of people around the table! There were Pharisees and tax collectors and ladies of the night and lepers and whomever would come. The active miracle or the active parable of Jesus' life was not that people needed to be saved, but that they were saved because from the beginning it was always that way - God's love available to all of those who would open their life to that love and who would experience the love of God in the love of the other.

That's quite revolutionary, really quite radical, and I honestly believe quite true to Jesus. The Church cannot long live with that kind of radicality of grace. The Church will soon structure it, package it, protect it, secure it. But, the table fellowship of Jesus was the expression of the unbrokered immediacy of the presence of God and, in the communion of brothers and sisters, was the experience of the gracious God.

Look around the table, so to speak, this morning. You will be immediately impressed with one thing - there's not much diversity, is there? Wouldn't it be wonderful if this morning it was true according to that children's chorus - "Red and yellow, black and white, ..." Wouldn't it be great this morning if we look around and we recognize that in this community somehow or other we were able to transcend social and cultural and economic barriers? We're pretty lily-white and affluent. Pretty much proper citizens, all. Are there any sinners? Well, a hand or two. And I suspected that. But, you see, the Kingdom of God is the immediate presence to those whose eyes look into another and say, "I love you," whose voice affirms, "I am for you," whose arms embrace and whose whole body language says we are brothers and sisters. And suddenly that horizontal experience of communion is transformed into the experience of the living God, and then we

know, don't we? Don't we know then? Are we not then sent out to live justly and to love mercy and to build human community?

Look at the faces around the table. If we really got it right, if we really followed Jesus as radically as Jesus followed his vision, which of course, led him to crucifixion, then who would be around the table? Red and yellow, black and white, rich and poor, educated, uneducated alike, men and women, adults and children, straight and Gay, Pro-Lifers and Pro-Choicers - all sorts of people who express their own individuality, the consequence of their own insight and experience, but know that they know nothing of the living God except in the embrace of the other.

It is in human community around the table that the reality of God is known. Dear friends, God is not "up there," above us. God is not "out there," in front of us in some unknown future. God is here and now, in you and me. Or, we're only kidding ourselves.

So, take a moment. Look at the faces around the table and experience the gracious presence of the living God.