

Christmas Eve Reflections

Mark 2:13-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

In junior high I was a part of the 'in' crowd, or at least one of the 'in' crowds. There was a group of about ten of us who were great friends in those days and we did everything together in school and out of school. I loved junior high. High school, not so much. I was never in the 'in' crowd at my high school. Part of the reason was that I went to a school quite a distance from my home, an all-boys Catholic school. I chose it even though I knew almost no one else who was going there. When I arrived as a freshman I soon realized that all the other kids seemed to know one another, having grown up together in Catholic elementary school. I was a shy kid in those days and never worked my way into those existing groups. I mostly kept to myself. So even though I spent four years there, and even though I actually had plenty of great friends *outside* of school, when I was at school I remained largely anonymous.

My hands down least favorite place on that campus in those days was the cafeteria. I think I ate lunch there one time in four years. Can you guess why? In junior high I had a place to eat lunch every day. To this day, nearly 40 years later, I can remember the very table in the junior high lunchroom where I sat with my friends. In high school I had no such table and no such group of friends, and so just about the worst possible scenario in my mind was me standing in the middle of the cafeteria with my lunch tray but nowhere to sit and nobody to sit with. It happened once. I never let it happen again.

There is something undeniably profound about the act of sitting with others around a meal table. In some ways, who you eat with defines who you are, and generally we eat with those to whom we are connected. Or maybe it's the other way around, that when you eat with somebody, something about that shared meal around that shared table forms a connection.

Think about it, one of the last things any of us wants to do with an enemy is share a meal. You may find it possible to get along politely with a colleague at work you don't much like or respect, but you probably aren't in a hurry to set up plans to go out to lunch together very often. Dr. Martin Luther King once found it appalling that "the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." I'd argue that the most segregated hour in many churches might be twelve o'clock, when people after worship break off in their compatible groups to go out for lunch, while those without compatible groups go home.

Who we eat with defines us, and not only defines us but binds us. There is more than enough statistical evidence to prove that in general the family that eats together stays together.¹ Bonds are strengthened around the family dinner table. Lives are shared. Children learn a sense of security and belonging. One of the best and easiest things you can do to strengthen your family and nurture your kids and grandkids is to put away the phones, turn off the television, and share a meal together as often as you can. There is just something profound that happens when we break bread together around a table.

Isn't it true that many of the best times of our lives, and maybe even the best times of the Christmas season, are spent around tables full of good food? How many of you just came from, or are planning to head off to, a feast around a table with those you love? One of the saddest songs I've ever heard is a song by Randy Stonehill called *Christmas at Denny's*. The song begins,

They got Christmas Muzak
Piped in through the ceiling
And the refills of coffee
Are always for free
And the waitress on graveyard
And the surly night manager
Are wishing that all of us losers would leave

There's a star on the sign
At the Texaco Station
Like the star long ago
On that midnight clear
As I look all around
At these cold, empty faces
I doubt that you'd find many wise men here²

The deepest wounds in life are exposed around dinner tables. Sitting alone on Christmas Eve at a table at Denny's. Imagine a child who is told by her family that she is no longer welcome around the family table. Divorce, one of the deepest wounds there is, tears apart dinner tables. This Christmas there will be an empty chair around the table for the first time in some of your families, a chair that used to be occupied by one who

¹ See <https://www.goodnet.org/articles/9-scientifically-proven-reasons-to-eat-dinner-as-family>

² Written and recorded by Randy Stonehill, it appears on the album *Return To Paradise* (1989) and on the collection album *The Definitive Collection* (2007).

died this past year. Deep joy and deep pain both climax around tables.

My favorite piece of furniture in our house, by far, is this dinner table. I love it so much I hauled it here on Christmas Eve to show it to you. It's not an especially fancy piece of furniture. In fact, it was a hand-me-down from a friend. We don't even have six matching chairs to put around it, but it's just big enough to seat six people, which works perfectly for our family. I have eaten countless fantastic meals around this table because I am married to a fantastic cook. There has been lots of laughter and stories shared around this table, more than a few angry words spoken across it, and even some tears. Some of you have joined us around this table for a meal. All of you are welcome to join us, though not all at once. (And not tonight, because it's here.)

My wife has us mark our drinking glasses with the initial of our first name so we can reuse them and conserve on doing dishes. We also each have our own cloth napkins for the same reason. I know which one is my napkin because each one of us has a specific napkin holder. Mine has the big bronze button. In other words, when I show up for dinner I can always find my place.

And that's no small thing. You see, I'm not always the easiest person to live with. Sometimes I can be a downright jerk. That may surprise some of you. Others of you are thinking to yourself, "Yeah, that sounds about right." Even on my worst days, however, when the proverbial dinner bell rings and I show up at the table, there is still a cup with a "J" on it and a napkin holder with a big bronze button. Because I belong here. Not just when I am at my best but even when I am at my worst. Same is true of everybody else in my family on their best and worst days. We eat together because we belong together. Or maybe we belong together because we eat together; I'm not sure which is which. What I do know is that I am profoundly grateful that I have a place at a table like this. I hope you also have a place at a table like this somewhere in this world.

You see, we were made *from* and *for* communion. Do you know that word? It literally means 'with-oneness'. We were made from and for 'with-oneness'. One God made us all, but that one God has existed, for all eternity, in the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The idea of the Trinity – one God in three persons - is beyond our comprehension – it blows the mind! - but it nonetheless describes reality. God exists, by nature, in community, which means that creation, especially humanity, was made *from* communion.

We were also made *for* communion, to live 'with-oneness' in relationship to our Creator and to one another. We all know this. It's why we experience such deep joy when we find connection and belonging in life, and also why the deepest pain we know in life is the pain of being alone, unwanted, unwelcome. Something in every human soul knows that he or she was made from and for communion.

The problem is that this 'with-oneness' is so painfully and perpetually elusive. Our world, and our lives in this world, are littered with broken communion. Most human suffering and pain are the fruit of broken communion: poverty, war, injustice, divorce, terror, abuse, lies, slavery, racism, violence. And all this began, the Bible tells us, when God told us that he would share with us the fruit of every tree in his garden, all-you-can-eat meals with him forever, but we instead chose to eat the food from the only tree in the garden he told us not to touch. God said he would nourish us. We said, "Thanks, but no thanks. We'll nourish ourselves. We'd prefer to eat alone." Even from the beginning we have always been defined by who we eat with and by who we choose not to eat with, and at some point we chose, every one of us, to eat at our own table instead of join God's at his.

The results of this decision have been devastating and undeniable. What's worse, we can't fix things on our own. Wrecked communion, between us and God and between us and other another, infects every corner of our world. Even when we find ways to reconnect to one another, the empty places keep showing up at our table. Communion with God is life. Broken communion with God leads to death. In spite of our best efforts we simply cannot fix the mess.

Thank God that into this mess comes Christ, the very Son of God, the eternal One who made us for communion. He comes, so that he might restore communion. There are countless passages from the Bible I could have chosen tonight to make this point. The one I settled on might have seemed to you an odd choice at first, especially on Christmas Eve. I wonder if it doesn't seem so odd any more.

Levi was a tax man, which meant there were very few tables at which he was welcome. Tax collectors in those days worked for Rome, the enemy occupier of Israel, by collecting taxes from their fellow Jews. These were traitors who made a profit through extortion, by collecting more than they should have collected. The whole system, in other words, was rooted in deceit and greed. That meant there were no honest tax collectors. An honest tax collector was a starving tax collector.

For this reason, men like Levi were despised and rejected by their fellow Jews. Levi would have been a disgrace to his own family, no longer welcome at their table. He would have been expelled from the synagogue, unwelcome at that table. If you touched a tax collector your whole household was made spiritually unclean. Now who's going to invite Levi for dinner?³ In a day when your dinner companions not only defined you but could defile you, Levi was unwelcome at just about every table in town.

So what does Jesus do? He calls Levi to be his disciple and then goes immediately to his house for dinner. And not just Levi; there is a whole load of other tax collectors and reputed sinners around the table that night. This wasn't the first time. It's difficult to count the number of times Jesus shared meals around tables with people nobody else dared eat with. It was like he just couldn't help himself. And the religious leaders back then hated him for it because it undermined their whole system, their whole way of thinking. We are defined by who we eat with, and the good people, the people God favors, eat together separate from the bad people, the people God has rejected. They hated Jesus so much it's one of the main reasons they set out to kill him.

But they should have known better, and so should we. At the heart of God is communion, 'with-oneness.' It's what we were created from and for. How then could God desire anything else with his creation but communion? It's why God came to earth in Christ, to reconcile, to restore 'with-oneness', to bring people back to the table with him and with one another.

Do you know the most important piece of furniture is in this house, in this house the church calls home? It's not the pews, though we have some amazing pews here. So comfortable, right? Maybe too comfortable. In the church I grew up in the pews had no padding. All wood, solid oak. Straight back. Close together, no leg room. We were flying economy in those days. You all are flying business class. Enjoy. We've got great pews, but they are not our most important furniture.

It's this Table, along with the baptismal Font in the back. There's a reason why there is a dining table, what we call the Lord's Table, in the center of most every church sanctuary. Maybe you're so used to seeing it here you never even notice it anymore. Notice it. There is a meal table smack in the center of this sanctuary. It's the focal point, the spot around which we gather to worship. That's not by accident. Again, people are defined by the tables around which they

gather and by the other people gathered there with them.

It is around this table that week in and week out we remember what it is that Jesus has done, not just for Levi but for us all. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, took on a real body with real blood flowing through it. He became one of us at Christmas. That's one of the things this bread and this cup point to, Christmas. He became one of us! But on the cross that body was broken and that blood was poured out so that that the full weight of our sin and broken communion could be forgiven and healed. Through the life, death and resurrection of the one born in Bethlehem all those years ago, God has made a way for us back to his Table. And when we celebrate this meal, as we're about to do, we not only memorialize what Christ has done, but we participate in it with Christ. Jesus, in some way that I can never begin to explain, meets us here, welcomes us here, feeds us here, forgives us here, and ultimately goes with us out from here into the world.

I love this table in my house. I have a place here, even on my worst days. But please don't leave here thinking about me and my table. You will have missed the point if you do. I mention this ordinary table only to point us all to this extraordinary one. Here is the good news of the Gospel, the heart of Christmas: you have a place at this Table if you want it. There is a glass here with your initials on it, a one-of-a-kind napkin holder that was set here just for you, and, most importantly, a host who, though he knows you even on your worst day, still loves you enough to sacrifice everything to set a place for you here. Levi, of all people, was welcome here. So are you. And if Levi is welcome here, and you are welcome here, everybody is welcome here.

This meal is sometimes called Communion. With-oneness. That's what's going on here. It's not just about the nourishment, though this is place for a soul to be nourished. It's also about the eternal family who gathers from every corner of the globe around this table to commune with one another and their God for all time. It's about the table we will one day sit around in God's Kingdom on the day when Christ returns and establishes with-oneness everywhere and for all time.

In a moment you will be invited to share in this feast. *You* are invited to share in this feast. But let me clear about one thing. Jesus isn't messing around here. There is nothing trivial about what's happening here at this table. If we take all this lightly we do so at our own peril. Your place at this table cost Jesus his life. We dare not then come and take our place if we are not, in turn, ready to give him ours. Levi didn't have much to offer Jesus, but when Jesus called him, Levi gave Jesus what he had. He left everything and followed

³ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Apollos, 2015), 112.

him. He gave him his life. If we too will bring our lives, as broken, and flawed, and confused, and full of failure as they are, we also will find a place here. And a place not only as guests, but as family.

All who trust Christ, all who *want* to trust Christ, even all who want to want to trust Christ, know that you are invited to come and share in this feast at this table which Christ himself has prepared.

Amen.

