



“An Invitation for You”

Luke 24:13-35

October 3, 2021

From the very first days of the Christian movement, the table has been at the center. Of course it all started with Jesus. So much of his ministry took place at the table: eating with outcasts and outsiders, accepting invitations from Pharisees and tax collectors, telling story after story about banquets and feasts where the most unlikely companions gathered together. And when they did, the kingdom of God showed up. In fact, the earliest followers of Jesus—our ancestors in the faith—were the subjects of gossip, ridicule, and condemnation for their fellowship dinners because they insisted on including the poor and the rich, slaves and free, women and men, Jews and Gentiles. All were welcome at their table because *it was not their table*. It belonged to God, not human hosts. And God invited everybody. And so that table, first set by Jesus, is still the place where we gather. At that table, set by Jesus, we welcome all who are trying to follow him and all who still wonder what that means. Like every table in every home, the Lord’s Table holds many stories.

This morning’s story from the Gospel of Luke takes place on Easter evening. Now please note: only a few hours have passed since two women heard the message of angels outside the tomb, proclaiming that Jesus was alive again, set loose on the world. But no one has seen him, not yet. And so, two disciples travel the road to the village of Emmaus, their journey filled with melancholy stories of Jesus’ life and teaching. I imagine it like a long car ride with an old friend. Long stretches of silence, and then someone says, “Do you remember the time when...?” It’s the language of grief, tears and laughter so intermingled as to be indistinguishable in the bittersweet memory of what was, what happened, how it went down, what could have been. And at some point during this seven-mile

walk, a stranger catches up to the two friends. Now, you know who he is, but the grieving disciples cannot recognize him. Sometimes sadness has that effect on us. The stranger asks what they’ve been talking about, and they can’t believe this guy hasn’t already heard. It’s been all over the news. It’s a trending topic on Twitter! They describe the painful events of recent days, three days that have broken their hearts, concluding with one of the most poignantly sad phrases in all of scripture when Cleopas says, “But we had hoped that he was the one...” *But we had hoped*. Hope has been relegated to the past tense. *We had* hope. *We had* hoped. But not anymore. No longer. Not now. Not after what had happened. *We had* hope.

Jesus, a stranger to them, engages in the conversation, interprets the scriptures, opens possibilities. But none of those words, none of those scriptures, none of those stories, unlock the hearts of the disciples so slammed shut by grief. Only the table does that. They’ve been walking for a long time. The day is nearly over. They stop, and they invite Jesus to join them. Well, that’s not quite accurate. They urge Jesus, compel Jesus, in fact they *force* him to stay. There’s just something about that stranger. They want to hear more.

The three take seats at the table, the disciples surely planning to host this stranger. But as soon as the table is set, Jesus reverses the roles. He takes a loaf of bread and holds it in a way that must have been strangely familiar to them. He blesses it. He breaks it as though he’s done this somewhere before. And he gives it to them.

And they see him. And they know. They just know, in that moment, that the story of resurrection is real, and the stories of their lives will never be the same again. This story will change all their stories.

The disciples receive no metaphysical alteration, no display, no show. There is no theological treatise or elaborate explanation. Just a borrowed table. Just a crust of bread. Their eyes are opened when the bread is broken, and they know. They *know him* at the table.

On this World Communion Sunday, I've been thinking about the powerful act of eating together in the ministry of Jesus and in the life of the Church. Princeton Seminary New Testament professor Eric Barreto says that, "Jesus is his most Jesus at the table, at an ordinary meal infused with significance because of the people gathered around the food." You see, the trademark practice of Jesus is the act of sharing a meal. We *meet him* at the table.

Some of you know that my wife Sara is a leader in our denomination's work of starting new worshipping communities all over the country. I know I'm biased, but it's the most exciting and vibrant ministry the Presbyterian Church USA has these days, and the stories of transformation, creativity, sacrificial risk on the part of entrepreneurial leaders, and faithfulness are often astounding to me. In these new communities, the Spirit of God is breathing new life into old institutions and making a way for the Church to embrace its call boldly, broadly, inclusively, incarnationally. And at every single one, there is a table. The table is as diverse as the people gathered around it, but it is always at the center. One of the pieces of wisdom that Sara has taught me from this ministry is this simple adage: *Don't ever invite someone to church until you've invited them to dinner.*

I think Jesus would endorse this instruction. The table is still the center of Christian life because at the table walls of separation we insist on building, lines of division we insist on drawing are torn down and erased, broken apart as bread is broken. At the table, we see Jesus, *and so* we can see each other in a new way.

And my, haven't we missed the table! More than a few folks came out of the 9:30 service to tell me it had been two years since they shared this meal. One of COVID's many cruelties has been the loss of shared meals. Not just this table, but the

understanding and friendship that come from bread broken with others. So often over the last many months I have yearned for the opportunities of reconciliation and dialogue afforded by shared space. I've lamented the loss of those shared spaces, those opportunities to hear different voices and see each other eye-to-eye, face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder, human-to-human, soul-to-soul. Opportunities to pass dishes we brought from home and hold hands for prayer. Opportunities for unrestrained laughter and deeply felt human connection. We have desperately needed a table to share and hold these stories. We have desperately needed a table where we meet and know Jesus. We have desperately needed a table, and instead, we have seen through a screen dimly, our vision of one another mediated by billions of pixels, our voices obscured by microphones and speakers. These screens have kept us from spiritual starvation, yes, but I do think deep down we know they cannot fully nourish our hungry hearts. We need a table. We desperately need tables.

When Jesus broke the bread, their eyes were opened, and they saw him. They knew him. At the table set by Jesus, they find their footing for future faith. Here's what happens, and this is important because the story we tell this morning does not end at the table. Instead, these two formerly hopeless friends sprint back to Jerusalem that very night with a new message. The Lord has risen indeed. Only because of what happened at that table, only because of *who* was with them there, and now anything is possible. They run back. Charged up. Ignited. Equipped for the work of ministry.

Did you know...of course you know...that this table is portable? I've seen this table in hospital rooms and homeless shelters. I've seen this table in preschool classrooms and under a canopy on the beach. I've seen this table off the trail in mountains, in prison cells, and in the car. I've seen this table on the playground and at a dining room table. I've seen this table in my back yard, and I've seen it in church basements. On Friday afternoon the Lord's Table—this table—was set up outside the apartments at Lakeside Pointe

because a few Second members brought bags of groceries and gallons of milk to our neighbors who are hungry. *Our neighbors who are hungry.*

Our neighbors are hungry. Those four words ought to be reason enough for followers of Jesus to set a table. *Our neighbors are hungry.* And so, we went. Now, I know it looked like a folding card table, but when the bread is broken, eyes are opened. And we see him. And we saw him. And we know him. And we knew him.

I really do believe this: That because Jesus Christ is alive, anything is possible in a world of physical and spiritual hunger. That because Jesus Christ is alive, hearts can be changed. Resources can be gathered. Ruined buildings can be reconstructed. And ruined lives can be made whole again. Since Friday, I can't get this image out of my mind. A man who has lived at Lakeside Pointe nearly nine years said to me, "When I first moved here, we used to decorate our windows at Christmas. The kids loved that." *Our neighbors are hungry*, and we have a table.

This morning, we'll create a new memory at this old table. Most dangerous words in the church: We've never done it this way before. Pre-packaged plastic cups of juice and tiny paper-thin wafers. Don't wait for a crunch. None is coming, I promise you. The juice tastes like Kool-Aid to me. Another adjustment to these strange times, when we've known hunger and hopelessness and the fear of those disciples on the road to Emmaus. And yet. The table has stayed at the center every step of the way. The table is still there. All are welcome because the table belongs to God, and not human hosts. At the table we still welcome those who are trying to follow Jesus and all who still wonder what that means.

And Jesus Christ is still host of our table. The Resurrected One who restores faith and reignites hope. The Resurrected One who walks alongside us, often unseen and unknown, through every valley of despair. The Resurrected One who just keeps tearing down every single barrier we build to keep some away from the table.

Jesus Christ is the host of this table. From the bread he breaks, and blesses, and gives, you can receive nourishment to satisfy your deepest need. Just come to this table with empty hands and open hearts.

But the story doesn't stop there. Because Jesus Christ is the host of our table, you will be sent to a world of many hungers, called to set tables, extend invitations, share whatever you have to serve God's persistent pursuing grace.

This is the Lord's Table. It tells our stories. It gathers us, equips us, and sends us. Just like these tiny, little pre-packaged plastic communion sets, this table is portable. It moves into the world. By God's grace and with the courage of Christ, let's follow it. Amen.