

Around the Table

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

The resurrection of Jesus is the climatic moment both of the gospels and really of our entire faith. In the resurrection, God has overcome all of the world's evil, sin, violence, and death using only the power of love. It is a profound miracle. But after the resurrection, this incredibly profound and mysterious miracle, the gospel stories are filled with the disciples finding Jesus in very ordinary things – the breaking of bread, in the midst of doubt, and sharing breakfast together. Between now and Pentecost, we will look at how God often comes to us in very ordinary ways. We don't have to always have some supernatural encounter of the divine to experience the hope of resurrection. Rather, more often than not, we can experience that hope in the daily, ordinary things around us if we just pay attention, and one of those things is something as simple as having a meal together.

In Jesus' culture, sitting down at a table and sharing a meal together was a big deal. Showing hospitality was a big deal. You had a responsibility to invite travelers in for dinner, to put them up for the night. When a guest came over, you didn't just serve them anything, you served them your very best. But just as food was a big deal, so too was the idea of placing people in categories of the right kind of people and the wrong kind of people. One of the most influential New Testament scholars of the last century, NT Wright, has written extensively about this social dynamic, saying that the guiding principles of mid-eastern culture were the concepts of "honor" and "shame." To have honor meant that you had social respectability, that you kept the religious purity laws, and that you demonstrated the very best of your people's traditions. Having shame meant that you or a family member had gone against tradition or norm or didn't keep the religious purity laws so that your family was disgraced. At its most extreme, this was the system that categorized some people as unclean – they were the people who carried the most shame. And as big a deal as food and hospitality was in that culture, the unclean were the one group of people that it was ok to not invite in for dinner. If they were hungry, you may throw them some food outside, but whatever you do, don't invite them in because you don't associate with the unclean or you might lose your place of honor and take on their shame.

But then Jesus comes along and shatters these norms, or rather, it's more accurate to say he shattered part of it. Jesus kept the norm about food and table fellowship. He strongly believed in hospitality and that sitting at table together, that sharing food, that offering your best was important and a way that we show you belong, that you are an important part of the community. But the difference – and it was a really big difference – was that instead of using food and table fellowship to uphold the culture that says some have honor and some have shame – Jesus used food and table fellowship to teach that everyone should have a place at the table.

And finally, Jesus went even a step further in teaching that the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God was a place where those most rejected, most shamed here, would have the seats of honor. He told parables about how it would be the poor, the lame, the unclean who would have

the best seats at God's table while those with honor here would have to wait their turn. The first would be last and the last would be first.

2000 years after the time of Jesus, the most enduring symbol we have of who he was and what he was about is the cross –of how Jesus took a symbol of death and transformed it into a symbol of life. But that wasn't the image that Jesus, himself, picked for how we are to remember him. For Jesus, the image he picked was the table. Throughout the gospel of Luke, the writer wants to make sure we understand how important the table is for Jesus. And just in case we've missed the point, he includes one final story at the end of the gospel just to make sure we really get it. In our Scripture we read earlier, two of Jesus' followers are on the road to Emmaus. These are not central characters in the gospel. They aren't part of the 12, but are instead part of the larger community of people who followed Jesus. In fact, this is the only account in all of the gospels we have of these two people. And as they travel, they are discussing how Jesus had died and, even though they had heard from Mary and the women that Jesus was risen, it's clear that don't believe it.

And then Jesus shows up and starts walking with them, but they don't recognize him. So Jesus starts explaining why the Messiah must die. He starts teaching them the Bible. And continues talking Bible and theology with them for the entire trip. But they still don't recognize him. It is only when Jesus sat down at the table with them, when he took bread and broke it that that finally see him for who he truly is. Notice that it wasn't in a discussion about theology or Scripture but rather around the table that they were able to finally recognize Jesus.

I love this story because it tells us both how we recognize Jesus and how we share Jesus. Notice that even Jesus could not reveal himself to them through talking about the Bible, through talking about theology. Words couldn't convince them that Jesus was there with them. It was only when Jesus took bread and broke it, it was only when Jesus sat down to share a meal with them that they were able to see him for who he truly was. It's Jesus. It's Jesus who ate with those thought to be righteous and those thought to be sinful. It's Jesus who ate with tax collectors and lepers. It's Jesus who always had a place at the table for everyone. This is who Jesus is and this is how we recognize him and this is how we share him. The resurrected Jesus was finally seen for who he was not when he was explaining Scripture, not when he was discussing theology, but when he broke bread at that table.

Today, we are starting the work of sharing with you the themes we heard in our listening sessions about our purpose as a church. The most common theme that you all named is that the purpose of a church is a place where you experience community, friendship, and belonging...that we want to be a place where everyone can experience those things. Several people mentioned our version of sitting down and eating together – coffee hour as a part of that. Mike did a great job of recapping that as well and I might add that in addition to coffee hour, the times we've all been treated to Mike's barbecue is one of those times also. We all want to belong and we all know that food has a way of bringing us together.

But I want to end by naming one other thing that came out of our listening sessions. This church and a lot of people in it still have a lot of wounds from the conversation around the banners. In fact, 18 people specifically mentioned it in the listening sessions. And one thing is clear, there are a lot of people from all sides who feel hurt. And there are some people who feel estranged from others in this community. I've sat with a number of you who wanted to talk about that and one thing that I've realized is that the circumstances made it very difficult for this church to have that conversation well. It's so hard to talk about hard things through email or on zoom.

But here's what you can do going forward. If there is someone you feel upset with, someone you still feel there's some tension between you, you can call that person up and say, "Can we have lunch together? Can we have dinner together? Can we grab coffee together?" You can sit down around the table and break bread together. My guess is you won't suddenly agree, but maybe you can start to heal.

In a few moments, we will be invited to come to this table to receive Holy Communion, to be invited as guests to Jesus' table. And as we do so, we remember the last time Jesus' gathered his disciples together around the table as they shared the bread and cup with one another. It was an oddball group of fishermen and outsiders, but there were two people who I'm always a little shocked to find sitting at the same table. There was Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. Zealots wanted nothing more than to overthrow Rome and were willing to use violence if necessary. Depending on your perspective, they were either freedom fighters or terrorists. And there was Matthew, a former tax collector, someone who took in revenue for Rome. Think about that for a minute: Matthew the one who collected taxes for Rome and Simon who wanted to violently overthrow Rome were sitting at the same table breaking bread together. In another life, Simon wanted to kill people like Matthew, and yet there they were, both at Jesus' table, both a part of Jesus' family. My guess is they still didn't understand each other very well. My guess is they didn't agree on politics or what to do about the Romans. And that matters.. But what mattered more is that they both knew that there was a place for both a zealot and a tax collector at Jesus' table. There was a place for both of them in Jesus' family. Surely, there is a place for all of us as well.

I am so excited about all that we heard in our listening session. I'm so excited about the possibilities we have before us as we live into our future. But if that is to happen, we're going to have to figure out if we can move forward together. A good first step might be something as simple as reaching out to someone to say, "Can we break bread together?"

Amen