

CHURCH AT THE CROSSROADS

Table Manners

1 Corinthians 11:23-34

October 6, 2022

A decade ago, celebrating our fifth wedding anniversary, Sara and I went to see a movie about a couple in their late eighties who had been married for sixty years. *Still Mine* is the story of Craig and Irene. As Irene's painful battle with Alzheimer's Disease progresses, Craig is determined to build, by hand, their final home—a simple cabin with a gorgeous view and an easy-to-navigate floorplan. As he struggles with zoning boards, building codes, and his wife's increasing illness, Craig also reflects on his life.

For me, the most moving scene was an imagined conversation between the couple. It begins with a slow camera sweep across their dining room table. Zoomed in, you see the scratches and dents, the marks and chips in the wood. Craig, seated in that dining room, begins, "Do you remember when I built this table?" Isolated in her memory care unit across town, Irene answers, "We had been using a sawhorse and planks for so many years I'd given up on ever getting a proper one." Craig then describes in detail the process: milling the boards with his father, putting twelve coats of finish on to protect it. Irene reminds him with laughter that it didn't help when one of their children spilled ink on it. And this prompts Craig's honest reflection. He says, "The first few years, every nick that table absorbed, I took personally. It's all I could see: a dent from a fork, a scratch from a skate blade, ghost of someone's handwriting pressed through a single piece of paper. There were a lot of times I regretted to myself not making that table out of oak. But, as the years have gone by, the scars added up, and the imperfections turned that table into something else entirely. That's the thing about pine...holds a lot of memories."

The scene is a metaphor for what matters. A parable. The table. It is a picture of life—the untidiness, the disorder, the mess, the memories, the love. The times of overwhelming joy when the table was filled with abundance of every kind and people from everywhere, and those moments of unbearable grief when every seat save one was empty. All of life happens at the table.

In the Christian community, tables have always mattered. From the very beginning, they are gathering places. They hold memories. They recall our purpose. They reveal our identity. They show us who we are.

In this morning's text, Paul returns to the central issue of division. Remember, this letter is addressed to a congregation Paul launched and a people he loved, a church struggling to remember its identity and recall its purpose. This time, the division is over worship itself, and it seems that the Corinthian Christians have designed a tiered approach to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Early arrivers, the wealthy and well-connected, enjoy exclusive fellowship and the best meal. When the rest of the community finally shows up, the food is all gone. The early arrivers are satisfied and, yes, a little tipsy. And Paul is furious. *What you are eating is not the Lord's Supper.* Why not? Because if the table is not for all, it cannot be Christ's table. Paul commands the Corinthians to remember the table Jesus set, to follow his example. Proper etiquette. Table manners. *When you come together, wait for one another.*

Now, before you rush to judge your faith ancestors too harshly, I must offer a word of context. The wealthy believers in Corinth were simply behaving according to accepted social norms. It was expected that those with money and power would gather with those of the same social class. They had us over; we'll have them over.

Enjoy the best food and drink. Display their abundance for each other. The Corinthian believers who have the means to get drunk, to eat their fill, to live in their own homes, are behaving no differently than anyone else in such a position. And *that* is the problem.

This is a different kind of table. The cross deconstructs barriers that define and divide us. The host at this table is one who served all—especially those who had nothing. At his table, we have been called to remember him by doing what he did.

Last weekend, Hurricane Helene brought catastrophic destruction to areas across the Southeast. One of the towns hit hardest was Black Mountain, North Carolina, where our family has traveled several times a year for as long as I can remember. Indeed, some of my earliest memories took place in those ancient mountains. It was there on a conference at Montreat that I first experienced God's gentle nudge toward a call to pastoral ministry.

My dear friend Mary Katherine Robinson is the pastor of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church. The church sits in the literal center of that small town. Last Saturday evening, we were able to connect briefly when she had cell service for a few moments. The report she offered was difficult to take. "Chris, Montreat is so, so sad. So much damage and loss." Not long after that, Mary Katherine posted an update on social media. She described how she had spent that Saturday. How, in a matter of hours, the church parking lot was transformed into a banquet hall. Bounty and Soul, a local nonprofit was providing some food for local firefighters, and soon the burger joint in town, Mac's, gave fifty pounds of ground beef. Not long after, members of the church and the community started showing up with the contents of their freezers and refrigerators. And they all asked the question engraved on the communion table in the sanctuary. The question from Jesus. *Has everyone been fed?* Mary Katherine wrote: "We'll be feeding people Sunday afternoon from 2 to 4. If you have frozen meat, bring it by. We'll be making pots of soup and handing out whatever

we have to give. If you need a place to sleep, you're welcome." In the last seven days, that church has fed thousands of their neighbors, providing a ray of hope in a time of such sadness and loss.

I heard from Mary Katherine last night. She wrote these words: "The terror and the horror leaves me speechless. We're lamenting. But, my God, the love. It makes all the difference and reminds me of the beauty of the human spirit, that we will rebuild. We will repair. We will continue to love this beautiful town and every person in it!"

When everyone is fed, this is the Lord's Table. When the invitation is to all, this is the Lord's Table. Come exactly as you are. Bring whatever you have. Take what you need. Listen to Paul. If everyone is not welcome, it is not communion. If there is not a place reserved for the stranger, we've missed the point.

This morning, with Christian believers all over the globe, we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Today, tables will be set in open fields and soaring cathedrals. Tables will be set in shelters for the homeless and at hospital bedsides. Tables will be set in homes that lack electricity. Tables will be set among gatherings of believers under threat of violence. Tables will be set in a church parking lot where homemade soup and bottled water and the embrace of community will be the body and the blood broken and poured out for all. In every place where that happens, sacred words will be spoken.

Do this in remembrance of me.

And we will remember. We will remember that the role of the church in a time of crisis is to set a table. That the role of the faithful, when there is not enough, is to prepare a meal. That the role of the church, when some are left out, is to invite everyone to share the feast. The hope of the table is the hope of transformation. Paul believed that the Corinthian Christians were called to a different set of standards than those practiced beyond their community. And so too are we. When we share this meal, we cannot comfortably return to a world defined

by division or marked by disparities. Yes, the unity of the body at the Lord's Table must change us. We who dine at this table must be redefined by this table.

The covenant you've received today describes this radical redefinition, this new set of standards. So, when you take the bread and the cup today, take a moment to consider your call in the weeks ahead. As heated—even hateful—rhetoric takes over the national discourse, as neighbors are turned to enemies, we can embody a different way of being.

We can set a different kind of table. A seat for every soul. A taste of what God intends for all. So come to this table, and remember who you are. Amen.