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At the Table We Belong
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Luke 5:29-39

Last summer at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian conference center in the high desert of northern New Mexico, we stayed upstairs in the only two-story building there. The table at which I did sermon planning for two weeks, was piled high with books and ideas, and had a view of the dining hall.

There's no bell summoning everyone to mealtime, but three times a day, people begin drifting in, from art classes where they've been welding or throwing pots, from the stables and machine shop, the laundry facility and maintenance shed, from deep theological discussions, from the administrative offices, and the yoga yurt, from places far away, there to visit for the day.

From these disparate places and purposes, they come to eat together, hungering for a meal, yes, but also for that which comes with the food: *belonging to one another*.

Most of them sit outdoors, so I could watch them gathering. With no assigned seats, everyone mixes it up. The joyful feast happens haphazardly, and in various languages. Young and old, ranch hand and sophisticated collector of art, all sit together. Local residents and city slickers – the movie was filmed there 30 years ago. First-time visitors and lifelong summer denizens like us. We all squeeze in together at the tables. The crows are in the cottonwoods overhead, squirrels and chipmunks in the mulch; one year we even had a young bull wandering among the tables.

At the Ranch the daily hours are kept with the ritual of coming to the table. They come from west and north, from east and south, to sit at picnic tables together and feast. I was always among the last to get there, because I found it so moving to watch from my second story perch these diverse strangers finding their way together to the table.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, *I imagine that happening on a global scale*: the whole world gathering for the feast that has been prepared. Languages, cultures, and national identities all mingling over the meal.

Jesus spent a lot of time at the dining table. Think of all the gospel accounts of a meal with Jesus – on the hillside feeding 5,000; in the house where a woman washes his feet with her hair and tears during dinner; with Zacchaeus at his house when the tax collector has a life-changing experience; at Mary and Martha’s home when the two of them debate on how best to host him; at the Last Supper; in Emmaus; at a resurrection fish fry on the beach. We could sub-title the gospels: *Jesus eating his way across Palestine.*

Each of these meal stories is about more than getting some food. They’re told in order to ask, then and now: *who has a seat at the table?*

The Black American spiritual, *I’m Gonne Eat at the Welcome Table*, expresses that we all feel: the deep desire of every human being to be included. The story is told that it was sung by an enslaved child taken from his mother. The song was first published in 1874 by the Hampton Institute in Virginia, one of the oldest African American schools in the nation, and site of the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation in the south.

The song lifts up a central theme of the gospel and echoes the prophet Isaiah's vision that one day "a mountaintop feast of rich foods and well-aged wines" will be held for all, including those who have been denied heretofore the fullness of their own humanity, for one reason or another.

"We're gonna feast on milk and honey," the final verse declares, trusting that God invites all to the welcome table, where *freedom will be the main course, and justice, the sweet desert*. The hymn became a freedom song in the Civil Rights movement. Like other anthems of the time, music carried the strength of the people, lifting the head and filling the heart, and giving the body energy for another day.

The film *Summer of Soul* is one long celebration of the power of music to create community and build hope for a new day. The movie chronicles the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969, using footage only recently discovered. The Harlem Festival featured The Staple Singers, Stevie Wonder, Sly and the Family Stone, Nina Simone, BB King, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and dozens of others – including Black gospel choirs, like the Edwin Hawkins Singers.

The music was a celebration of cultural richness and the resilient art of a long-suffering community. People from all walks of life attended the Festival - little children, families, elderly, well-known and affluent people - but mostly just folks from the neighborhood. It was a two-month-long foretaste in song of the day when the welcome table would be spread, and justice would issue invitations to the feast.

“Precious Lord, take my hand,” Mahalia Jackson sang,

“Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.”

Home is where we have a seat at the table. In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus teaches about who is welcome there.

He has invited Levi, a tax collector despised in the community, to join the disciples and Levi has accepted - and decides to throw a dinner party for Jesus. He invites his friends - other tax collectors. They’re the last people

you'd want to be seen with, because they work for the occupying Roman army. They're known for getting rich by cheating people. Levi's dinner is an assembly of sinners, and everyone notices.

"Those people," the Pharisees and scribes say, "Should never have been let in the front door. Jesus should not be there. What's he doing? John would never have done this. We would never do this."

Jesus overhears and responds. "These people are the ones I have come to save. They need help, but you prefer to judge and ignore them."

They grumble some more.

"This is something new," Jesus says to them, refusing to revile Levi and his friends. "This is what God's love looks like," he says: *new wine in fresh wineskins*.

Jesus is speaking to us at this point, across the ages and around the globe, signaling something to us in our unrelenting judgement of others. Jesus sends that same signal when he says, "love your neighbor as yourself," and a lawyer asks who our neighbor is. Jesus tells him

about a Samaritan who stops to help a half-dead man who probably hates him. The Samaritan takes the injured man to an inn where he pays for a room *and for meals* until his life is restored.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemy,” the psalmist says, because in the reign of God, even those we despise, or of whom we are afraid, have a place at the welcome table.

Professor Wendy Hui-Kyong Chun is the director of the Digital Democracies Institute. She studies the impact of the Internet on politics and social relationships. Chun will speak at noon tomorrow here and online at a Westminster Town Hall Forum.

She introduced me to the word *homophily*. It comes from the Greek, *homo*, or “same,” and *philia*, the feeling one has for a sibling. *Homophily* refers to the human tendency to stay with those who are like us, to make our circles tight, and to exclude those who are not.

We have majored in that for a long time. This is nothing new among us, Chun says – and, knowing Minneapolis, she points to historic racial covenants in housing and

other ways of keeping out those not wanted. Our city was full of them – ways to keep the circle closed.

It's easy to "Love our neighbors as ourselves," she says, "Because our neighbors *are ourselves.*"

That's not what Jesus had in mind.

The algorithms of the Internet have made more extreme the desire to stay with our own and shun those deemed unacceptable. We click on one comment against someone unlike us, and it leads to another and another, drawing us further into what Dr. Chun calls, "agitated clusters of comforting rage."

We know what she's referring to here. We all have been there: *agitated cluster of comforting rage.*

The Pharisees and scribes in the story today are practicing *homophily* in their *agitated cluster of self-righteous rage.* It's entirely possible that the tax collectors returned the favor. That's certainly how it is in today's circles of mutual contempt. The fear and hatred flow both ways.

Jesus rejects that approach to life in community. That's why he calls Levi, a tax collector, the last person people would want him associating with, to be one of the 12 disciples. That's why he meets with foreigners and women, children and those with leprosy, and others displaced from community. It's why he goes to that sinners' feast.

This is new wine in fresh wineskins. We're not going to do thing as we used to do them. He's pointing to a different way to live together. He's confronting the tax collectors about the injustice of their systems, and showing smug religious leaders that God intends to change them, as well.

Who would it be in our world and in our time? *Who are the objects of our rage?* Would we have the courage to join Jesus in embracing a love so radical that it pushes us to go places and eat with people we would otherwise do everything to avoid?

These are not abstract, Sunday morning, questions. A lot is at stake. As if the pandemic alone were not enough, a pernicious polarization, driven by Internet-fueled deceit and our nation's rampant odium, has a vice grip on American life these days. It threatens the peace in our

communities. It has led to violence. It could undo our democracy.

Professor Chun advocates refusing to accept that the world has to be like that. I don't know if she chose language like that because she was coming to talk in a Forum in a church, but that's Jesus-language: refusing to accept the world as it is and working to transform it. The Internet, she says, may fan the flames of social discord, but *it* is not the cause of all that divides us. *We are. We* are the ones Jesus has come to save – from ourselves.

When we join in the Lord's Supper, especially on World Communion Sunday, we go to the table with Jesus and discover a lot of people there we would not have invited – those we tried to keep out of our neighborhoods – they'll be there; those we could never vote for – they'll be there; those we avoid when we walk down the street, those we arm ourselves to defend against, those we assume to be unlike us and, therefore, not deserving of the fullness of their humanity – we'll see them at the table.

At one of the Ghost Ranch meals this summer, I noticed at another table an older couple – probably in their 80s. I assumed from their clothes and her jewelry that they were

not staying at the Ranch. They were too clean. They were probably wealthy day visitors, I assumed. Up from Santa Fe. I also noticed they were not wearing name tags showing they had paid for the meal. *Freeloaders*, I thought. *Not supposed to be there. Who let them in?* I said to myself like a latter-day Pharisee. *Surely, they could afford it.* I was convinced.

I was getting all huffy and judgmental, working myself into quite a lather about them, and about to say something when they started to leave.

The husband handed his wife a cane. As she struggled to her feet and turned, I saw bandages in multiple places. Her face was terribly cut and bruised, one eye nearly swollen shut. I felt a rush of shame for wanting to turn on them, and, instead, asked if they needed help. It's as in the biblical story one of the priests who had passed the injured man suddenly had a change of heart and ran back to offer some help long after he should have done so.

She explained she fell a week ago and this was their first time out for a meal. They had driven up from Santa Fe – I was right about that – found their way to the picnic tables. They were so grateful for the welcome they had received.

I suddenly found myself in a gospel parable. Maybe a Samaritan had helped them get there, to recover from their injuries. It reminded me that we all belong at the table.

The work of Christian love – your work and mine – is to resist all that gets in the way of the world God intends for the human family, and for all creation.

That world is seen most clearly at the welcome table, like the one set before us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.