

SERMON: "TABLE SETTINGS & TABLE MANNERS"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 133
NEW TESTAMENT 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

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INTRODUCTION

We had to cut down the three big ash trees in our back yard – ash boar got them
I really wanted to do something unique with what was left of the trees,
especially the one in the middle of the yard. I wanted to build a table around it
So I called my friend Kyle who is much handier than this guy
And we (I really mean he) built this table. **Show picture.**

But before that, when Levi and his crew were cutting the trees down,
That was when the work on the table began. First thing, cut the stump high.
Cut it off at a standard table height. I measured – 30 inches
Then take the pieces of the tree and cut them to make chairs
I measured the chairs in the house – 17 inches

But it was not quite that simple. We did not cut twelve 17 inch high chairs
The table is built to seat 12 people (we like to entertain, esp. outside)
You see the ground in our back yard slopes a good bit.
We had to make some of those 'chairs' much taller than 17 inches
We had to cut some at 17, some at 20 and some at 25 inches

And then given my measuring (I know ... measure twice, cut once)
We still had to adjust and build up the ground in some places
The ground doesn't slope all that evenly

That is the image I hope sticks in your mind as we talk about God's table
And, in particular, the particular table settings we are called to make
so there is room at the table for all God's beloved and someone is not stuck
in the short chair at the end of table kind of down in a ditch looking over
the table like Tim Allen's neighbor ... barely visible above the fence

The image is meant to suggest an answer – a way to treat one another fairly
by taking into consideration our differences – chairs of different heights
for people of different heights, different chairs, different people, same table

So there is the challenge – how to give everyone a place at the table
and a possible answer, offer a variety of table settings (and seatings).
With an answer in hand, let's look at the problem - the inequalities, the divisions
as they are evident when God's people come together around the table

TABLE FELLOWSHIP

Paul's letters to the Corinthians addresses those divisions head on

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

"Now in the following I do not commend you"

That sounds a whole lot like the 'over the glasses' talk from your parents

"Your father and I are disappointed in you, in your behavior"

The Corinthians weren't behaving well with their siblings

What exactly was going on there?

Let's start with what was not going on, not happening

The table is often meant to be a place where people come together

The table is common ground, a place to share a meal together

A place to get to know one another – table fellowship over ham balls or ribs or tacos (okay, vegetable dishes too). Over bread and cup.

The table is the place for family and friends to be together

Through this pandemic we've realized how much we miss that eating together

We like time together with those closest to us. We also like larger gatherings

That togetherness, that table fellowship, is not just for those already together

The table helps bring people together, makes introductions, builds bridges

What little peace there is between Palestinians and Israelis is the result of eating together. The Oslo Accord was based on getting negotiators together out of town (all the way to Norway) and around a common table

Think an earlier version of Anthony Bourdain introducing us to the world

That togetherness around the table was not happening in Corinth.

Our parents taught us certain manners for the table. A whole set of them.

There are the usual ones about not talking with your mouth full. There are some unique to your family ... because mom's biscuits are just that good.

No taking a biscuit early and no licking a biscuit to claim it. I tried that

There are more. Did you have to wait on everyone before you started eating?

My mom, Annie, was big on that one. So too was the Apostle Paul

The Corinthians weren't waiting on each other, "each one goes ahead with their own"

No waiting. No togetherness, just ahead with their own

WORKING ON OUR TOGETHERNESS

The sacrament of holy communion, World Communion especially,
is meant to celebrate and foster that togetherness, that time together.

I appreciate how Paul gives us the words we use when we celebrate the sacrament.
He does so right after this “In the following, I do not commend you” talking to
And right before he picks up that same argument about dealing with those divisions
This is what he says amidst that “You can do better” kind of talking to ...

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

We gather at the table together to remember Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf
That shared meal is both a memorial – ‘do this in remembrance of me’
and a preview of the banquet we will share in heaven – a foretaste of glory divine
This feast of bread and cup is not something we do in isolation
not even now during this pandemic and our attention to public health

The image of a table, throughout church history, is quite intentional
Yes, it is true that this Passover meal Jesus shared with his followers
when he said those words about his body and his blood was not at a table
A Passover meal is eaten in a reclined position with pillows on the floor

Still the image of table fits with this passage (and with our celebration of the sacrament)
And I don’t mean a table like DiVincis Last Supper. I rather doubt they ate
at one long table all on the same side. What Paul is asking for and insisting on
is the togetherness we find at the table, a big table, where we wait on each other

And no, I don’t mean eat all at the same time on cue. That can be meaningful
What is most important is that togetherness. In Corinth that meant waiting
Those in the lower classes would be the last to the table, their work would keep
them longer (think household servants). The more prosperous could eat
earlier, have a few drinks (hence the reference to drunkenness in Paul’s words)

That same challenge exists today relative to work schedules
There are other challenges too ... and with them other opportunities
to figure out how to make togetherness work. Offering gluten free bread
would be an example. So too offering an online worship option.
So too making more spaces for wheelchairs and chairs of different heights

The good Lord wants us together and sets the table for us
Think about it, this “place for everyone” idea isn’t original to us. It’s Jesus’ idea!
He is the one who sets the table and sets the tone for our togetherness

SUMMARY

We just elected elders and deacons last Sunday

The training begins in a few weeks, their terms of service begin in January

I wonder what they'd think if we changed things up a bit – went old school

If we did things like we did two hundred years ago a few things would be different

One, those elected to serve on Session would do so all their life long

No three year terms back then. They'd also get to help with communion
with a practice since discontinued.

Show picture of communion token

They would go with the pastors before the Sunday communion would be served

Together the pastors and elders would visit members and determine
their worthiness to receive the sacrament. And if worthy they would get a token.

No token. No communion. No place at the table.

I don't think any of the new elders, just elected, would want that job.

The passage we read today from 1 Corinthians does talk, even warns us,
about how we need to be serious about coming to the table.

But to need a token? Glad that practice, even though it started
with our spiritual ancestor, John Calvin, was discontinued!

Yes, we need to approach the communion table understanding it is
quite the invitation. It is both an invite to a family meal in God's kitchen
and an invite to a sumptuous feast in the great banquet hall of heaven.

It is humbling really to know a place has been set for you
a chair set at just the right height, a table set with space for your wheelchair

It is an invitation with your name on it.

And his name. And her name. And their name.

It is an invitation to a shared meal, a meal together!

So let me end then with an invitation to the table, like ringing the dinner bell

It is language often used in our bulletins. I should have thought to put it in this week.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not a right conferred upon the worthy.

It is a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance and love.

It is indeed a privilege to find our places around the table ... together.

There is room. There is always room!