

The Church as Table and Road
Luke 22:14-20; Matthew 28:19-20

September 20, 2020

Today's sermon began in my mind last month as I read an Op-ed. in the New York Times by Emily M.D. Scott, a Lutheran pastor. Years before she had started a "dinner church"—one of many popping up across the country—a church built around a weekly common meal as their primary worship and gathering time. Instead of incense in the air, the smell of spaghetti sauce on the stove. After 8 years as pastor she resigned to seek her next call and took off across the country on a road trip. She wrote of meeting God around a table and now on the road.

The article got me thinking about Grace Baptist these days as we carry on during the pandemic, about these two dimensions of church: church as Table and church as Road.

The pandemic has driven home the depth of our need to be together, worship together, break bread together and be at the Lord's Table together.

In the gospels Jesus is always eating, sharing meals with disciples and pharisees alike, the reputable and the disreputable, the tax-collector, prostitutes and sinners. A number of his parables were about meals. One New Testament scholar says that in Luke's gospel Jesus "is either going to a meal, at a meal or coming from a meal". Someone has called the Bible the "eatingest book in history".

In the beginning of the early church the first Christians met in the synagogue for worship on the Jewish Sabbath, then met again on Sunday for Christian worship around a common meal followed by a sharing of the Lord's Supper. Worship was centered around the Table.

How many pot-luck suppers have you been to in your life? A few years back Duke University Medical Scholl conducted a study of

the physical health of clergy vis a vis other professions. As a group, ministers were decidedly overweight compared with the others—no wonder! Occupational hazard! A life of fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and you have to taste all the desserts!

But the dinners smelled like *home!* The practice of common meals and worship are a treasured part of Christian community. And we are missing it! The church as Table.

II

But there is the important second dimension of church, the church as Road. Here is the church *sent*, sent out on mission in the world, the church as the salt and light for the world, the church scattered not gathered.

If you take a good look at the Bible you see roads all over the place, roads that are part of our sacred journeys through life. Abraham and Sarah were called to hit the road, leaving their home in Ur and headed for an unknown Land of Promise. Jacob fleeing

his brother and himself leaving home, striking out across the desert, and meeting God in a miraculous dream. Ruth follows her mother-in-law Naomi from her home in Moab to Bethlehem when she will become the foremother of David and Jesus. The Hebrew people led out of Babylonian captivity back to their homeland.

In the New Testament we see the Ethiopian eunuch on the road back from Jerusalem to Ethiopia when he meets Phillip the apostle, chariot to chariot, and is baptized in a desert oasis. Paul hopped on Roman road after Roman road to bring the gospel to the Roman/Hellenistic world.

And those two disciples trudging from Jerusalem to Emmaus late Easter Sunday afternoon, grieving and heart-broken over the crucifixion of Jesus two days before. Suddenly the Risen Christ joins them on the road, incognito. It wasn't until the evening when they had invited him to spend the night when around the table Jesus broke and blessed the bread and suddenly they knew who he

was. Just as suddenly he disappeared, maybe to find other along a road.

There it is: church as Table, church as Road.

III

But there's more to the church as Road. Jesus set his disciples out on mission:

And preach as you go, saying the kingdom is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons. (Matt. 10:7-8)

When I was in seminary I took preaching classes, but healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons?! We left that to the Pentecostals.

Here's the point: Jesus was sending them out to be his hands and feet in the world, and giving them the power of the Spirit to do so. The church as Road.

And then he sent out *seventy!* “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few”, he said (Luke 10:1-12). So out they went, fanning out two by two. If a town rejected them they were to “shake the dust” off their feet and move on. The harvest was *everywhere*, not just one field. So move on! The church as Road.

And then with his very last words to his disciples as the Risen Lord, he sent them again: “Go into all the world, making disciples, baptizing, teaching. And promising to be with them all the way, forever. (Matthew 28: 19-20)

IV

Grace Baptist began with mission on its heart and mind. Twenty percent of the annual budget, plus other missions offerings, would go to help people outside its walls. The church on the Road. You joined hands with other helping ministries, Fifth Street, ICM, Yokefellows, and more. You were the church gathered for worship, community and education, but always the church on the Road.

I've watched you these last six months when we could not gather being the church on the Road in many ways, caring for people in all kinds of ways: checking on people, helping the Boys' and Girls' Club, gathering food for ICM, witnessing your moral values in the public square.

This has been going on from the beginning in another way: You carrying the love of God to people through your occupations and professions, through the ways you relate to people wherever you are. You are the people of God in the world, sacraments yourselves, becoming for others the bread and wine.

V

There is one more important dimension of life on the road: The Road is our journey of personal transformation, as we become more fully who we are as children of God created in the divine image.

It is the "hero's journey" to use the phrase of Joseph Campbell, that master of myths, a journey of ups and downs, challenges,

defeats and victories leading you to your true home, true self. It is “the pilgrims journey” to use a Christian motif, as in John Bunyan’s classic *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

As we journey through life on the road we meet God there, Christ there, these, and are changed for the better.

Like Jacob, again, fleeing home because he had cheated his brother Esau out of birthright and blessing and deceived his father Isaac in the process. But one night on the road he lay down to sleep under the stars with a stone for a pillow. He had a dream of a golden ladder stretching from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending. A voice spoke, God’s voice, and instead of the “blessing out” he deserved, he was given *blessed assurance*. God would go with him wherever he went. Many years later he returned home not knowing what his brother Esau would do to him. When Esau saw him he embraced his brother and kissed him and wept. Jacob said, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

Amazing grace, twice on the journey. Sometimes when we are on the run from ourselves, we run into God.

Of course, Paul was changed on the road to Damascus—and the future of the church. As I think about it, most of the great encounters with God in the Bible happened outside, on the road, very few inside a temple or church. Isaiah's meeting with God in the temple is one of the few that come to mind.

The road, then, is a metaphor of our lives being changed as we journey through life, as we journey *toward* God, *with* God and *into* God with Jesus as our guide. On this road we will meet failure, disappointment, discouragement, defeat, but these moments can become moments of transformation. You will discover your weakness, but you can befriend your weakness, learn and grow in it. And even more, God can use your weakness for God's purposes. As God said to Paul, struggling with his "thorn in the flesh": "My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

Sometimes on the journey we discover that to be who God made us to be and is calling us to be, we have to take risks, leave the comfort of home, the safe harbor of life and go forth into the unknown. Th

I've told you that in Celtic Christianity the symbol for the Holy Spirit is the Wild Goose! No gentle dove no domesticated bird. The Wild Goose of the Spirit is leading you out and on to where God needs for you to go and where you most need to go.

VI

But of course, the church is where we come home to, our Table. We need one another more than we ever know. John Wesley said "No one gets to heaven alone." We may try, but we cannot. God created church as a community of faith, hope and love, a place where grace abides.

So we come to the table again. Virtually so, but our ties are unseen as well as seen. In our holy imagination we catch a glimpse

of one another at the table and hold hands in a circle. we remember all who have ever sat beside us in church during communion.

Christ's Table transcends space and time.

As we prepare to come to the table, here are the words of one of my favorite communion hymns and anthems, a prayer.

Draw us in the Spirit's tether

For when humbly, in thy name

Two or three are met together,

Thou art in the midst of them!

Alleluia, Alleluia

Touch we now the garment's hem.

All our meals and all our living

Make us sacraments of thee

That by caring, helping, giving

We may true disciples be.

Alleluia, Alleluia

We will serve thee faithfully.

The church as Table, as Road.