

Summary:

“Extending the Table,” the final in our series on Holy Communion titled “A Place at the Table,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, October 27, 2019

Detail:

A few years ago we bought new dining room furniture. For some reason that honestly, we're a little uncertain of now, we bought a table and chair set that sets up higher. So the chairs sit high, more like stools, and the table-top sits up on base that is slightly higher than counter-top height. I think we thought they would be easier to get into or get out of, or something like that. Oh well.

The table comes with a built-in leaf - so no storing it in a closet somewhere - so that it can seat 8 when it's compacted and can seat 10 or more when it's extended. We do love that particular feature of the table.

When we moved in July, the moving company removed the table top from the base to fit it into the truck and then when we arrived at the house they put it back together.

Well, as it turned out, on moving day the table was extended to its full length, so rather than compacting it, they just moved it as is and then rebuilt it at that length. And that all went fine. Until, that is, I tried to shorten the table so we could have a little more space in the dining room as we were unpacking boxes.

I pulled the table apart, folded the leaf away, and then attempted to close the table to its smaller position.

Well, the table wouldn't close all the way - something was blocking it. It would close part of the way but not completely. So I looked at it from all angles and tried to figure out what could possibly be stopping it and I couldn't figure it out. The gear on which it all moves was turning freely, there was nothing in the tracks that the table top slides in, nothing underneath stopping it.

I was stumped. I had Lynn look at it with me to see if I was missing something but still nothing.

So, I decided, I'd pull it back out to full length for now and ask our son-in-law Mike, Leah's husband, who does construction and is very handy, to take a look at it the next time they were over.

I went to slide the table back apart so that I could once again remove the leaf and put it back in place...but the table wouldn't come apart far enough to get the leaf out. So now I found myself between the proverbial rock and a hard place; I couldn't extend the table and neither could I close it. I was left with a six to eight inch gap or crack in the middle of the table, into which, I was sure, EVERYTHING would fall if we used the table - or at least, everything messy or breakable. Well, a couple of weeks later Mike came by, we looked at it, took some of it apart, including removing the gear and putting it back in place, and VOILA! - it worked as it was supposed to, as it was intended.

We were able to both compact and extend the table at will, and all was right with the world, at least our part of the world.

Our scripture today comes from a part of John's Gospel called the Farewell Discourse, in which Jesus is giving final instructions and teaching to his disciples.

And I like how theologian David Lose describes it:

"Let's set the scene," he writes. "It's Thursday evening, the night on which Jesus will be betrayed, handed over to his enemies, deserted by his friends, tried, convicted, and ultimately crucified. And knowing all that is to come, he gathers his closest friends, offers them parting words of encouragement and hope, and then prays for them.

He prays that they may endure the challenges that come their way.

He prays that they may discover strength in their unity. He prays that they will be drawn together as one as Jesus and the heavenly Father are one. And then he prays not only for them, but for all for who will believe in Jesus because of their testimony.

And that," Lose offers to us, "is where we come in."

Before we proceed, and as an indirect avenue into that part of the discussion, let me ask you a question, and I'm looking for a show of hands here, so don't be shy.

Who here was born in the church? No, I don't mean that your family was involved in or members of the church when you were born. Was anybody here actually, literally, born in a church building? No? Okay, good, because that would be kind of weird. So here's another question.

Who here, upon being born, after that first swat to your derriere and after taking your first breath and having your first cry, then immediately professed aloud your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Nobody? Really? That would have been so cool, wouldn't it?

I jest, but that's kind of the point David Lose is making here. None of us were born in the church, and none of us, with our first (or even second) words, professed our faith. We weren't "born Christian," we "became" Christian, we chose to become followers of Jesus. "All of us are now in church," Lose suggests, "because someone told us about Jesus. Whether it was a parent, friend, grandparent, pastor or whomever, someone told us about the good news that in Jesus we see that God loves us all, and inspired by this promise and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we came to believe."

And he continues, "But here's the thing: someone told the person who told us. And someone else told that person. And someone told that person as well...and so on and so on, all the way back to the testimony of these disciples who, despite their fear – both [on] this evening and on Easter morning – nevertheless moved out of the closed room in the promise of resurrection and began to share the good news of Jesus with others."

So when Jesus says this prayer not only for the twelve disciples but also for those who believe because of them, he's praying for John's original audience and for all Christians in all times and all places ever since, all the way up to you and me here today. Jesus was praying for us, you and me, even then.

Now, do I believe he was thinking, "Oh that Jay Anderson is going to need some extra prayer when he gets to college?" No, not hardly.

But Jesus had a sense of history, he understood the eternal nature of God. He knew the history of the people of God going back to Creation so I believe he had a sense of the future of God as well. And I believe he knew that his teachings, his impact would be known and felt over the years, the decades, the centuries, and the millennia. And I also think he knew that his teaching and his message, his Way, if you will, was radical, especially to the “church people” of his time, and that those who heard it and attempted to follow it would need his prayer. So in that sense, I believe that Jesus had in mind all of us, those who came before as well as those who will come after.

All too often Scripture can seem like mere stories told about people who lived such a long time ago that we may wonder what it has to say to us today.

But in a few passages – especially in John’s Gospel – there are these openings, these little doors, if you will, that open up to invite us into the story itself to be active participants in the ongoing drama of God’s love for all the world. We see one of those doors when Jesus, in his post-resurrection encounter with Thomas, blessed all those who believed in Jesus even though they hadn’t seen him. That blessing included John’s community and, of course, us. And now we get another door, as we hear Jesus on this significant night take time from everything else he was doing and had to say to take time to pray for us. Us! It was his way of extending his love and grace, through time and space, to us today.

What difference might knowing that make to people who don’t know the love of God, who don’t know the grace extended through Jesus Christ, as they struggle with challenges at work, home or school; as

they deal with set backs in their professional or personal lives; as they deal with grief or stress or illness; or as they face an uncertain future? Our opportunity, our responsibility as those with whom this Good News has been shared through a long lineage of believers, as those who have chosen to follow Jesus, I think, is to let them know that whatever they may face, they don't face it alone, because we are praying for them, and because Jesus was praying for them way back then and promises to accompany them through the presence of the Holy Spirit even now, all these years later.

And what difference might it make if we, as converted followers of Jesus Christ, also extended grace, extended love, extended Christ's table to those who need to be loved in a world that is so filled with anger, hate, and indifference, who need to experience grace in a world that is so often judgmental and unforgiving, and who need to be fed in a world in which people are starving while a quarter or more of our food is wasted every day? What difference might this make for for these folks?

There is something powerful about being prayed for generally, but even more so when you're being prayed for specifically. I shared with you last week how Lynn and I could feel your prayers these last couple of weeks.

The day after our son-in-law took his life, Rev. Karen Cook, a good friend and colleague who serves as the Assistant to the District Superintendent, Linda Middleburg, called me to let me know that they had arranged for Rev. Corey Perry to preach here that Sunday and to see if there was anything else they could do. Karen was the pastor at Crossroads before I was appointed there, so she and I have developed a good relationship over the years. At the end of our

conversation she asked if she could pray for me and our family. And I have to tell you, in that moment, having a friend and colleague speaking to God on my behalf, asking God to lift us up and help us through, when I couldn't find the words, was a moment that brought me to tears.

On that Sunday, when Rev. Perry led worship, I was with you. I needed to hear that message that day, I needed to hear his prayers and be in prayer with you.

So after worship began - not wanting to be a distraction for anyone - I slipped into my office and listened to his words and his prayers and I worshipped with you, then quietly slipped out before worship ended.

Prayer, and being prayed for, is a powerful thing.

The Great Thanksgiving liturgy with which we begin our celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion is itself, a prayer. It is a prayer of giving thanks to - the meaning of the word "Eucharist" - and it is a prayer of community, or communion *with* God and *with* one another.

As we have gone through this series we have looked at different parts of that prayer, and today we conclude with the last part of the Great Thanksgiving prayer that asks God to "make us one with each other and one in ministry to all the world."

"One with each other and one in ministry to all the world." That is a radically inclusive thing that we're praying for, you get that, right? One with each other and one in ministry to all the world means everyone.

It means Methodists and non-Methodists. It means Christians and non-Christians. It means Democrats, Republicans and Independents,

Socialists and Capitalists, liberals, moderates, and conservatives, LGBTQ and straight and cisgender; it means older people and younger people and people everywhere in the middle; it means rich and poor, those with college or graduate degrees as well as those who haven't earned a diploma or GED. It means caucasian people and people of color. One with each other and one in ministry to all the world is a prayer asking that the beautiful diversity of the Kin-dom of God would be made real in and through us and what we do in the name of Jesus Christ.

It means extending the love of God, the hand of God, and extending the table of God to all people, simply because they, like us, are beloved children of God.

Prayer is a powerful thing, and as has been said before, we should be careful what we pray for, because we might get it.

You all taught me something about extending the table at the Spaghetti Dinner the other night.

In fact, I think this arm is a little extended from walking around with a pan of breadsticks, handing out what seemed like thousands of them to a very grateful - and hungry - crowd on Tuesday. But what a great event! Doesn't it feel good to know that we're meeting a need, even if it's only a couple nights a year?

And as if the student turnout wasn't enough - 820 plates of spaghetti served - the support by all of you who volunteered and set up, tore down, cooked, served, and cleaned up was amazing! You all showed up! I applaud you for that! That was amazing grace, radical

hospitality, and extravagant generosity you showed to a community that often isn't given much of those.

I can't tell you how many of these young people expressed their thanks, over and over again, not only for the food itself, but for the very fact that we do this for them. Grace begets grace - love begets love.

The only thing that I think could have made it better for me is if there were some way to be able to have time to talk with and get to know some of these students better, to build some relationship with them.

That would have been the icing on the cake for me.

When we come together at tables with friends and family, we feel deeper connections and we create memories that last well beyond the dinner event itself. When we come together at Christ's Table, the connections we are called to make extend beyond this time and place – beyond this table – to include a connection to the needs of a hurting world.

Because we have been invited, blessed, and loved here, we too must invite, bless and love the world into connectedness and wholeness.

In the midst of all that is going on in the world at large, we Methodists are having our own little family feud right now about oneness as it pertains to human sexuality. Dr. Jaime Clark-Soles, who is Baptist and the Associate Professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas wrote in an essay a couple of years ago titled "That They May Be One' or 'Unity Jesus-Style',"

“In the past few years, several denominations have invited me to speak to gatherings about church unity based on John 17. Because it makes perfect sense to have a Baptist, of all people, hold forth on church unity. Baptists refer to church conflict as church growth!

So I can't say there's ever been **more** unity after I've left the gatherings, but I'm always happy to try.

“Numerous denominations have split and have done so in an ugly, destructive way. Many of us who are not Methodist are watching, praying for, and rooting for the Methodists to exemplify a still more excellent way to do Christian community in the midst of serious disagreement and conflict.”

Other denominations are prayer for us. Prayer is a powerful thing. Being prayer for by another is a powerful thing.

As I shared last week, our oneness, our unanimity, comes not from shared belief or shared practice, but through Jesus Christ and him alone.

I believe God is present in what is going on in the United Methodist Church and that God will birth something new in this process that will reflect Christ's desire for our one-ness. Regardless of what that looks like at a denominational level, **our** calling, **our** opportunity at the congregational level is to extend Christ's table to all of God's children, regardless of their degree of sameness or difference from any of us. We cannot allow the messed up gears of a denominational dining table, being pulled apart from both ends, to stop us from heeding God's call to feed the hungry in our midst - whether that hunger is physical or spiritual.

In fact, I think a Christ-like response to God's call to us might sound like this:

May we double down, may we go all-in by extending the love of God, the grace of God, and by extending the table of God to any and all who God places in our path, lest they fall through the cracks of our brokenness.

May the gears in our table be jammed open to its fullest, so that the table will be filled with the people who need to know the love and grace of God that has been shown to us. That, I believe, is the way Christ sets the table, invites us to the table, blesses the table and extends the table. Amen.