

Gathered by Grace

Acts 2:42-47; Luke 14:1, 12-24, 15:1-2

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Sept. 7), 2025

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You may have missed this, but I read that on Thursday morning Joseph McNeil passed away at age 83 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Joseph was one of the legendary Greensboro Four, the first four young college students who on Feb. 1, 1960, sat down at the all-white lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro. Joseph was 17 years old and had just entered the ROTC program at North Carolina AT&T State University, a historically Black college, and who later retired from the Army as a Major General. He remembered that at the time, even at age 17 ROTC was teaching him how to organize to meet a goal, and his Christian faith and the example of the young preacher in Montgomery, AL, Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired him that non-violence was the way to achieve the goal of simply being treated as an equal at the lunch counter. In less than a week, what started out as four black students trying to break the color barrier at the lunch counter grew to a movement of over 200 students at the same counter.

The inspiration for the lunch counter sit-ins came directly from our Gospel reading for today. Jesus tells the parable of the marriage feast, right in the middle of a dinner for Jesus and his disciples given by a prominent Pharisee. And lest anyone miss his intent, Jesus turns to his host and says, "Look, when you give a big dinner or lunch, quit worrying about inviting all the right people, powerful people, or even people who are just like you. Instead, invite everyone, all sorts of people. Invite people who are poor and have no other place to eat. Invite those out

on the margins, those overlooked, invite folks who are beaten down and worn out. This is what living the resurrected life looks like.”

Then Jesus told another parable emphasizing the same. Living life in the resurrection, is about filling every place at the dinner table with all who will come. You don’t get invited to the table because of merit or accomplishment or social class or racial labels. With Jesus you’re included because of grace. And grace is not about who you are or who we are. It is about who Jesus is. And in the Gospels, it is at the dinner table where such distinctions are most clearly seen and practiced.

In Luke and Acts, a dinner table is everywhere. Jesus seems to either be at the dinner table, on his way to a dinner table, or just leaving a dinner table. The problem was that every time Jesus came to dinner, something happened. So much so, that the Religious Leaders complain and gripe, “It’s getting to where you can’t just sit down and have a meal together. Jesus is getting all the people all stirred up. I mean common people expect to be let into the country club! And if you invite Jesus to dinner, get ready! You don’t know who he’ll bring with him. All sorts of sinners will sit down with him, and he’ll actually eat with them!”

Jesus is trouble at a dinner party. He is not the nice guy we make him out to be. He is not the least bit interested in proper etiquette and he shows little patience in making small talk. Quite frankly, many dinner hosts probably thought Jesus should go back to having dinner with John the Baptist, the local, organic honey and locally caught locusts-eating-cousin to Jesus who also had a reputation as an edgy prophet.

But Jesus taught and the early church practiced that this is what life in the reign of God is to look like. It is true that someday, in heaven, we will eat with all sorts of people. And it is true, that someday when all of history comes to an end

and everything culminates with God and in God there will be a great marriage feast with the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

So, the early church said that in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, the reign of God, the God Movement is breaking into this present world. And the church in Acts shares all things in common and practices economic redistribution. In other words, they start practicing Jubilee now. And when they eat, they don't eat alone, they eat together like it will be someday.

And it seems the church did not make any distinction between simple eating together in contrast to what we call the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, or the Eucharist. In Jewish fashion, the early Christians believed that after the table blessing, every table is a sacred place, and eating together is a sacred activity no matter if it is bread and wine or brisket and potato salad or baleadas (ba-lay-aa-duz). Every table is sacred and that includes this table, or perhaps tables at Dilly Dally's, or the upcoming retirement banquet in November.

Gathering by the grace of God was something new in that old world. It still is.

No one ever thought that these stories from Jesus about gathering by grace so people from different races and economic status and sexual orientation could eat together would lead 2000 years later to such subversive activities as ending racial segregation at lunch counters which led to the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in public accommodations, employment, and federally funded programs.

Here at this table the risen Jesus Christ gathers us by grace and feeds us, so we become Christ's people of grace in solidarity and unity. Here we are sustained

by Christ in the face of division, deportation, and discrimination. Here, together, we re-member who we are in Christ Jesus.

Tony Campolo tells the story of his friend Ralph who pastored a church on the Upper East Side in New York City. He would have doughnuts and coffee every morning at the same little diner on his way to the office. After two months of this, he noticed the same people were there every morning. So, one morning he stood up and said, “Excuse me everybody, but I’ve been coming in here every day for two months at 6:30 in the morning. It’s the same people here every day and I don’t know anyone! Would you please stand up and introduce yourselves and tell us who you are and what you do?” Well, it was kind of a “who’s who. A couple of TV celebrity wives were there and Tom Wolfe, the author. It went on and on. They all introduced themselves; everybody said what they were doing.

The atmosphere changed and they shared a sense of community. People would come in and say, “Hi Camille! Hey Ralph! Morning Bill!” They knew everybody except the guy who ran the place, Harry. They ganged up on him one day and said, “Harry, we don’t know anything about you. Where are you from? Do you have a family?” He didn’t want to answer, but they pressed him so finally he said, “Alright. If you have to know, my name’s not Harry. It’s Haseem. I’m from Iraq. My family is in Baghdad even now!” And he said it with anger because the 1991 war seemed imminent and inevitable. Everybody stared at their coffee and finished quickly and got out of there.

The next morning around 5:30, Ralph was awakened by the phone. The guy at the other end said, “Have you been listening to the radio?” He said, “No.” The guy said, “We’re bombing Baghdad!” Ralph hung up the phone, dressed in a hurry, rushed over to the coffee shop. To his amazement, at a quarter to six in the

morning all the regulars had already arrived. They were standing on the sidewalk outside the locked door. They wanted to be there when Harry – Haseem – got there, at six o'clock. When Haseem turned the corner and saw them, he was amazed. They ran up, encircled him, they hugged him and cried with him. Finally, Tom Wolfe said, "Alright, alright. Ralph, you're the preacher. Pray!"

Ralph told Campolo, "I stood there on the corner. Here I am a Baptist preacher praying for a Muslim with some Jewish people and some agnostics standing around praying with me. When we finished the prayer, I looked up and tears were streaming down Haseem's face who then said, 'Alright. Alright. But you still have to pay for the doughnuts!' But then he added, "But from now on, my friends, and you are my friends, the coffee in this place will always be free!" Campolo's friend Ralph said, "As I held a doughnut in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, I wondered if I had ever been at the communion table in church with such an awesome awareness of the presence of God."

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.