

Quinn Daune's fiancé called off their wedding only a few days before the couple was to walk down the aisle together. Quinn was not left standing at the altar, but she was left with \$35,000 in non-refundable deposits for the wedding reception: the banquet hall had been booked for months, flowers were being delivered, and the caterers had purchased the food and were in the process of preparing it. Nothing could be done.

Quinn's mom, Kari, described what happened next to a local news reporter: "When I found out ... that the wedding would not be taking place, it just seemed like, of course, this would be something that we would do to give back." So the family leapt into action. The flowers were sent to local nursing homes and the family reached out to homeless shelters in the Sacramento area. In the end, 90 men, women, and children, families, off of the street were invited, gathered, and treated to a lavish and unexpected wedding feast at Sacramento's Citizen Hotel.¹ It was a biblical story come to life.

In the early church, Christian community life was centered around food. The only thing that could stop Jesus from teaching and preaching to a crowd of thousands was the need for them to eat. The only thing that could detour Jesus and the disciples from their constant march towards Jerusalem was the need to stop for a lunch break. Even the night before Jesus's crucifixion and death, everybody had to gather for one final meal together. Even after the resurrection, nearly the first encounter with the risen Christ was around food. Food is central to our faith.

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cancelled-wedding-homeless_n_5624b342e4b02f6a900cd200

In the old part of the Old Testament, an altar to God was a place where the divine reality and human reality touched. It was a place of encounter between God and God's people. It was a special place where stones were heaped up as marks of holy places. It was a place where Abraham or Isaac spoke or wrestled with God.

In the New Testament, as Jesus and the disciples ate together, these tables became a new sort of altar of God in the world. They became a new place where God was encountered more fully and wholly than perhaps ever before. After the resurrection, they became a place where the divine presence was local and centralized in an encounter over plate and cup. And more than that, this present meal was a foretaste of the Kingdom of God banquet to come. They were rehearsing a meal that they would one day also eat in heaven.

And that sense of community and encounter comes to us in the liturgy we celebrate around this table often. "People will come from east and west and north and south and eat in the Kingdom of God.", we say. This theologically, biblically, faithfully rich statement flows from the very real experience of seeing people from north, south, east, and west truly eating together at the table of God placed in the world... and eating with God present in that place too. When Paul writes in Galatians, that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" it does not say explicitly that they were gathered around a table. My suspicion is that Paul came to that conclusion that way though. At the table, we are truly one with God and one another.

A few years ago, a traveling exhibition of early Christian art came to a Dallas museum. It was a fascinating look at the earliest images of our faith. For many of

the pieces, this was the first time they had been allowed out of the Vatican in hundreds of years. The items were of every size, everything from small coins and jewelry to intricate coffins and small statutes. One of the most frequently motifs of their art was the disciples and Jesus gathered around table. While the image of Jesus on the cross became the signature figure of Christianity in later generations, at the start, the primary image was of people gathered around this new altar in the world.

Who we eat with matters. How we eat with them matters. It says something powerful about who we are and what we are about in the church.

In my pastoral life, I found myself in retirement communities, often, visiting older church members. So many of these places are so nice now. They are retirement resorts, in many ways. But they are also an interesting social setting. For the first time since high school, many of these retirees are sitting at large tables, eating with strangers and friends. And just like in high school, there are different groups, cliques of people. One group over here gossips about everybody else. Another group talks about the Sooners or Cowboys football. There is a travel table and a cross word table and table for people with endless pictures of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Maybe a table for Presbyterians and Methodists. And then, inevitably, back in the corner there are a couple of tables for everybody who got left out.

Jesus teaches us in the Luke passage today, “when you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite

the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed”. Jesus suggests, do not invite: your friends (people who are like you), your brothers and your relatives (people who are also like you), or rich neighbors (people whom you want to be like). Instead invite: the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Invite the outsider and the marginalized. Invite the people not like yourself. Invite the people sitting in the back. And if you are the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind, be invited, accept the invitation and be at table. Come to the table and, hopefully, we will meet Christ there together. We will encounter Jesus in our midst.

Karl Barth explains that when the community acts to establish fellowship, it witnesses to God’s fellowship established in Jesus Christ, both between the whole world and God and among human beings. God in Jesus Christ joins with humankind. God establishes this fellowship between us and Jesus Christ.²

Our unity and division in the church and at the table is a witness to the world about who we are and what we stand for. As a church, in the small ‘c’ and large ‘C’ sense of the word church, we are called to be and can be a true community of God, a vision of the Kingdom of God. At this table, at this altar to God in the world, the world as it can be and the world as it is can meet. It can be a place where people of all ages, all ethnicities, all social classes, and more, gather around Jesus Christ. But that only happens when we invite those who Jesus would invite to this table or to a potluck in the dining hall or even a meal in our homes.

² Paraphrase. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation (Church Dogmatics IV/3, second part)*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 898-901.

The Rev. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate of The Episcopal Church, tells the story of a young woman who became an Episcopalian in the 1940s. One Sunday, she invited the man she had been dating to join her at the morning service. Both of them were African American, but the church they attended that day was all white, and right in the heart of segregated America. The young man waited in the pews while the congregation went forward to receive communion, anxious because he noticed that everyone in the congregation was drinking from the same chalice. He had never seen black people and white people drink from the same water fountain, much less the same cup. His eye stayed on his girlfriend as, after receiving the bread, she waited for the cup. Finally, the priest lowered it to her lips and said, as he had to the others, “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.” The man decided that any church where black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be a part of.

The couple was Bishop Curry’s parents.

Communion, Curry says, “is a sacrament of unity that overcomes even the deepest estrangements between human beings.”³

Friends, what happens at the table matters.

What is our vision for the church in the world today? What is our vision for the presbytery and the Presbyterian Church? The number one response in the last three

³ Evans, Rachel Held (2015-04-14). Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church (pp. 168-169). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

revisions of the structure of this presbytery has been “we are disconnected from one another”. I cannot imagine all the subtext behind that statement, but being a Presbyterian, I guess. That is to say, we can eat at this table together (and we will in a minute), but if we do not take the unity of this table from here we have missed the mark. We are here today from north, south, east, west. Will we be any more one body of Christ when we leave here today?

My deepest hope is that this table, and to a lesser extent, the tables we ate lunch at earlier will be transformational. In a world divided against itself in so many ways today, will we reflect the society at large or the Kingdom of God reality that is breaking into this world even today? This table, any table, may or may not be divided along all the lines we divide ourselves along this day, but what is for sure is that we can do a better job of going out and inviting people in to this table and tables like it in our presbytery and in our churches. Tables like it in our own homes and our own hearts.

You are the presbytery. You are the church. You are the Presbyterian. Who will you invite in? Who will you encounter God with today and the next you gather?