

April 14th, 2024

Luke 24:36-48 “Eating With Ghosts”

We Disciples often talk about the Lord’s table as the centerpiece of our faith and practice. We refer to it as a “radical hospitality table” where all are welcome. We lift up the value of table fellowship and how food brings us together. Many of our most beloved events in this church take place around a table. There’s “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner,” various potlucks and picnics including our annual “Pentecost Picnic in the Park.” There’s also receptions at memorial services and weddings and special occasions around Easter and Christmas. Then there’s fellowship time after church which we believe is a vital follow-up to our worship experience. There’s usually food at Faith and Films, Bible Study and game days too! Even on all church workdays we have food! When you think about it, food is at the very base level of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the church is wise to recognize this. Our Chalice Hymnal has 46 hymns dedicated to the Lord’s Table and 27 more listed under the “Lord’s Supper” in the topical index. There’s 19 out of our 190 songs in our purple Chalice Praise book that are dedicated to either communion or table fellowships. That’s ten percent! We have an entire service in October dedicated to World Communion Sunday and we take communion in the majority of our regular and special worship services. The table is where we gather to be nourished physically and spiritually. In the Old Testament, sacrifice is not about appeasing an angry God that can’t wait to smite us for our wrongdoings. It’s about welcoming God to the table and God welcoming us to the table. Disciples *love* the table. And so do I.

But we cannot fool ourselves into believing that only good things happen around a table. For some, the table conjures up negative feelings. Sometimes it’s a place where unhealthy and damaging power dynamics are used to remind people of their place in the hierarchy of whatever social structure that exists. In some cases, the table becomes a school where people are taught to “know thy place.” Who sits at the head of the table? Who gets to sit to the right or left of the one at the head of the

table? Who sits at the “other” tables? There are plenty of opportunities for deliberately awkward moments when the table is used in this way.

Want some examples of awkward dinners? Here we go. There’s the “meet the parents” dinner. It doesn’t matter if it’s “meet the person who is taking me to prom” or “meet the person I plan to spend the rest of my life with.” How many times have we seen this scenario played out in movies? There was the 1967 film, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* about a young white woman who introduces her black fiancé to her parents. Or the 1996 film, *The Birdcage* where it’s a gay couple in the “meet the parents” scenario. My favorite awkward “meet the parents” moment, which will surprise none of you, is in 2017’s *Spider-man Homecoming* where Spider-man’s alter ego, Peter Parker goes to his prom-date’s house to meet her parents only to discover that his prom date’s dad is a supervillain. That was one of the best plot-twist reveals ever!

Then there’s the “hidden agenda” dinner. I’ve got two examples of this to share with you. When I was a youth pastor at the First Christian Church in Dallas, Oregon, I had a young man in my Bible study who came from a neighboring city because their church didn’t have a youth-age Bible study. His dad was an attorney and his mom was the secretary of a fairly big Disciples church in the state capitol. He was wrestling with this call to ministry, and we were encouraging him to pursue this call because that’s what youth pastors do, right? One day, out of the blue, his parents invite Mary and I over for dinner one night. Big spread. Amazing food. The family was all there. Everything seemed to be going along great. Then the tone of the dinner shifted. We were told that their son was accustomed to a certain lifestyle that would not be available to him if he pursued a career in ministry. And this young man was sitting at the table too. His parents made it clear that they would not support him if he chose to go to school to train for ministry. You’ve got to understand that his parents were both active members in this church and had encouraged their son to be active in church. He was even on the regional youth council with Kacey Alexander who preached for us back in December. They said that he would be underpaid and that ministers are

often treated poorly. To which I thought, “Yeah, according to your minister you’re experts on that subject!” At this table, the host’s purpose was to tell Mary and I to quit encouraging their son to go into ministry and to tell their son that they will do everything that is within their power to make sure he says “no” to God’s call. Talk about an awkward meal. Whew!

Then there was the famous annual pastor’s luncheon hosted by the Hoesch Celanese Corporation in Narrows, Virginia. I told you a little bit about Hoesch Celanese back in February. They made acetate fibers at their plant. They were the number one employer in Giles County. Cigarette filters are made from acetate. Every year, the plant’s manager invited the pastors of Giles County to attend a fancy catered luncheon where we were told not to “preach against smoking.” Why? Because their bottom line *depended* on people smoking. If people aren’t smoking, there’s no use for their particular plant. And if there was no plant, there would be no jobs. And if there were no jobs, there would be no tithes and offerings for the churches. Wouldn’t it be sad if that happened? Wouldn’t it be sad that the ministers were be responsible for the financial collapse of southwestern Virginia? Tsk-tsk. I was waiting for the host to say, “Anyone want desert?” and wheel out a cart of Marlboros or something. The host’s purpose was to show the guests who was boss in that county. Again, awkward!

In all these cases, the table is not a place of inclusivity and equality. The table is instead weaponized and turned into a place where guests are told that there is no equality whatsoever. If you have ever experienced this kind of table, or if you grew up in a home where sitting at the table was painful, I understand how it might cause you to feel uncomfortable for how often we lift up the table as the example of how things should be. This is why some churches are careful about terms that we’ve used for centuries. This is why we are sometimes careful about how we refer to God as “father” or “king” or the church as “family.” We’re not trying to be politically correct, we’re trying hard to be conscious of people who have had traumatic experiences around some of these terms so we can

re-define and redeem their purpose. We just want to make sure people feel welcome and safe here at church.

The scripture for this morning is unique to Luke's gospel, but it's not a surprising story because there are 9 other stories in Luke that are about Jesus participating in table fellowship. There was the banquet at Levi's house, dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house, and the feeding of the 5,000. Then there was dinner at Martha and Mary's house, a noon meal at another Pharisee's house, and a Sabbath meal at still another Pharisee's house. Then there was the dinner that Jesus invited himself to at Zacchaeus' house! There was the last supper, of course, which is what we use as a reference point for our table. And then there was a little snack that Jesus had with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. There were a few of these meals where there was the potential for the kind of power dynamics I was talking about earlier, especially when the Pharisees were trying to lay a trap for Jesus to say or do something wrong so that they could shame him and put him in his place. But Jesus wouldn't allow that to happen. He always managed to get back to the heart of what the table was *supposed* to be, redeeming it as a place where all are welcome and where God is at the center of all that is said and done.

In the case of our scripture today, Jesus, had just returned from the brutal, lonely, and ultimately victorious journey from life to death and back to life again. His executive team, his closest partners in ministry ... the future of the church, are freaking out because they were still struggling with unbelief. Then all of a sudden Jesus appears out of nowhere. "Peace be with you!" And they're all like, "Ahhh! Jesus!" "Yes, that's me. Why are you scared? You know me." He shows them his hands and feet and his wounds from the ordeal he'd been through. And then he says, "Hey, y'all got anything to eat here?" And I stand by this translation 100% because Jesus referred to his disciples in the second person plural. In Greek, it's not "su" which is second person singular, it is "umas" which means "y'all." But why would Jesus ask for something to eat? Because the table, as it is supposed to be (but not always), is a

place of belonging. When the disciples finally realize that they belong and that Jesus is really with them, he begins to open their minds. When you know you belong and that the table is a safe place, you can finally begin the process of figuring out what is the next best thing to do.

While Jesus opening the scriptures and teaching the disciples is vitally important in this story, it comes only *after* the disciple's fear had been dispelled. It was after a meal had been shared. When we read about the last supper when Christ instructs the disciples to share until he comes again; it's not a lecture or an anthem or a confession ... it's a meal. It is to be repeated regularly. It involves the act of invitation ... of drawing together, of sharing food, of pausing long enough to lean in and touch and taste and to be fed and filled together. Eating together is an essential part of Christian conduct, right up there with caring for the poor and gathering for worship.

Our strength does not come from our certainty. Our faith is not about etiquette or "knowing our place." It's about community. It's about identity. It's about grace. And when we've touched grace and tasted community, we can be witnesses, even while we continue to wonder, both in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.