

The lights go down, the movie begins to play, and the opening credits flash on the screen. Suddenly, the opening montage begins to take shape. You hear the bombastic tones and the sultry words of Kenny Loggins begin to play. You hear about this danger zone, and throughout this opening sequence, the music continues to gain steam as jet plane after jet plane takes off from the aircraft carrier, and the high fives are flying just as rapidly as the jets.

But then the music goes down; the screen goes dark. There emerges one lone man in an empty airplane hangar in a bunker somewhere in the Mojave Desert all by himself. He's drinking coffee in this abandoned hangar, working on a plane, his accolades strewn across the walls. It's at that moment he jumps on a motorcycle and begins the miles-long journey into town.

The message is clear. This hero doesn't need anyone else besides his own pride, his own ability, and his razor-sharp jawline. The movie, of course, is *Top Gun Maverick*. That recent remake of the nostalgia classic in which Tom Cruise is playing Maverick, the main character. A film that bestows all sorts of nostalgia and maybe demonstrates the highest form of life—the individual, the rugged hero, the lone ranger. Now, maybe that movie isn't your cup of tea. Maybe you're not into aging action stars who never seem to age.

This theme of the Lone Ranger is not new. It could be *Rocky*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Jerry Maguire*, or *No Country for Old Men*. Let's try some animated movies: *Zootopia*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Moana*, and *Frozen*. Ultimately, all of these films play off this long-running American trope that's built out of a deeper ethos about what it means to be human—rugged individualism.

Each one of those films I mentioned, and far more, perpetuate this idea that all you need is yourself, that you, in fact, can be the hero of your own story. They resist authority, confrontation, or adversaries. They are able to seek justice on their own terms. All of this is built out of the idea that all you need is yourself.

These films don't just come out of nowhere. They're visual or narrative representations of common catchphrases that you and I hear all the time. Phrases like: follow your own path, you do you, or just be yourself. These movies tap into something about what it means to be human, but maybe even more so, what it means to be American. We have, at the very heart of our story, this idea that we can make it on our own. Is this really the way?

Is rugged individualism the path toward freedom? Is the individualism of Maverick or any other hero really the path to the good life?

I'm reminded of Robert Bellah, a sociologist out of UC Berkeley, and his seminal work, *Habits of the Heart*, where he explores the theme of American individualism. He writes: "Absolute independence is a false ideal. It delivers not on the autonomy it promises, but loneliness and vulnerability instead." Recent data backs up Bellah's claim. Most recent research depicts that America is going through an epidemic of loneliness. Sixty-one percent of adults aged 18 to 25 reported feeling serious loneliness. Those aged 15-24 have 70 percent less social interactions with their peers than previous generations.

But it's not just for the youth. Loneliness for those aged 50 to 80 has increased from 27 percent in 2018 to 56 percent in 2020. It's for those reasons in this epidemic that Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared the effects of loneliness as akin to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. We are living in an epidemic of loneliness. It's built out of the sense that we can make it on our own. We live in the tension of those two narratives.

Now, while the problem is certainly multivalent as to why we're so individualized and lonely, the solution is quite more straightforward. It's connection. We know this at our core. What it means to be human is to be built, not for the individualism that we long for, but for connection, to be known, to be seen. I am convinced, at the risk of being a hyperbolic preacher, that the time is ripe for the church to rise up and offer communities of welcome in the midst of a lonely world.

I am convinced that, maybe unique among all institutions in America, the church has the resources and capability to respond to this epidemic of loneliness. This is why we're in this yearlong initiative around the practice of hospitality, which we define as: Hospitality is creating a space where strangers are welcomed as friends, and friends are turned into family.

Within that, we believe one of the practical ways that we see from the life of Jesus of offering hospitality is through the habit of table welcome, which we define this way: Table welcome is the rhythm of extending God's hospitality by eating and drinking with those near and far from God.

So we're in week three of this series talking about what it looks like to open up our tables, whether literal or metaphoric, to welcome people into the presence of God. Not on our own ability,

but as this definition expresses, simply extending the hospitality that God has demonstrated to us.

There's something about the table. There's something about that at the very center of our faith, Jesus gave us this practice of eating and drinking together, which I believe is right for countering this moment. Before we get into the teaching text in Acts, I want to revisit our text from last week.

We talked about what it is to sit at the table with God. Because that's where it all begins. We have been welcomed at the table of God, and therefore, our welcome is an extension of that. Or maybe better said, we are inviting more people around that table in which God has welcomed us. Let's look back at the very end of the text we looked at last week, Luke 22.

**When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Luke 22:14-19**

Now, did you catch the line that we glossed over last week that's mentioned twice, in which Jesus says, "I've eagerly desired to eat this meal because I will not eat it until it finds its fulfillment in the kingdom of God"? And then later, when he's talking about the wine in the cup and he passes that around and says, "I won't drink from this wine until the kingdom has come."

So there's something about this meal and what Jesus understands about it that is pointing to a future reality. Now flip over two chapters to Luke 24. To bring you up to speed, as you churn there from that meal, Jesus would go out, he would be arrested, he'd be crucified, he would die, he'd be resurrected, and where we pick up in Luke 24 is on the day of that first Easter, Resurrection Day, we find this story. In this story, where we're parachuting into, Jesus is resurrected, and the disciples are trying to figure it out.

We shoot over to a different part of the story where two more disciples are leaving Jerusalem and walking to this place called Emmaus. As they're walking there, they're talking about all the events that just took place. It was a crazy weekend in Jerusalem. They're trying to figure out what was happening. So these two disciples have made the seven-mile journey, and they're discussing everything that had happened. All of a sudden, this third character walks into the scene.

The narrator lets the reader know that it is Jesus, but the text says they were kept from recognizing him. As they're talking about all these things, Jesus essentially says, "Hey, what's going on, guys?

What are you talking about?" Of course, Jesus knows what's going on. If you were in that area, you would certainly have heard about that crazy weekend in Jerusalem. So they began to share about everything that took place.

**He said to them, "How foolish you are, [Not a great way to start the conversation.] and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Luke 24:25-27**

So Jesus walks along, and he says that wasn't this always the plan? Just like the other disciples, these two had missed it. Essentially, Jesus says that he was going to host a Bible study and was going to start an Exodus. He goes all the way back to the time of Moses and preaches the gospel throughout the entire Old Testament, all that the prophets had to say about this hope. He reveals everything that was said about himself.

**As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. vv. 28-29**

This is the first time we've seen Jesus at a table since the scene in 22 that we talked about. He joins them at the table. And what do we find in verse 30?

**When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" vv. 30-32**

Did you catch it? Jesus, for the first time since that last supper, took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. The same four verbs we talked about last week that were so central to the Lord's Supper were present here. But remember Jesus' words, "I won't eat that meal until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." So what are we to think when he eats it post-resurrection that he said wouldn't happen until the kingdom of heaven arises, other than at that moment the kingdom of heaven was present and the identity and understanding of Jesus that was hidden from those two at Emmaus was revealed to them. How? By eating and drinking with Jesus and one another.

There's something about the table. There's something about this meal that reveals uniquely the presence of God. There's something about it in which these two at Emmaus are emblematic of all the followers of Jesus, in which when we come to the table in the unity of believers eating together in the presence of Jesus, something unique is revealed to us. The kingdom of God

is broken forth, poured out into the world, and the presence of God is no longer concealed but revealed to us.

See the response from these two. They just walked seven miles to get to this village.

**They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. vv. 33-35**

There's something about the table that reveals something unique and different. Here's the point that I want to make. When we welcome one another around the table to break bread in the presence of Jesus, we are ushering in the kingdom of God. Because that is what Jesus had promised when we gather as fellow followers of Jesus united only through his death and resurrection. It's in that moment that we do that and usher in the kingdom of God.

Acts 2, also written by Luke, is viewed as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, like a part 1b. It's the same story, fluid, running throughout. So, the themes of eating and drinking that were important to Luke in the Gospel of Luke are just as important in the Book of Acts. Is it any wonder that when we arrive at Acts 2, and you hear the clearest, succinct description of what the church is doing, that right in the middle of that, they're breaking bread? Of course, they are because that's what they had just learned from Jesus is that there's something that happens in that particular meal.

Turn to Acts where the disciples are working out what it means to follow Jesus. They're trying to figure out exactly all that he taught them. It's the earliest expression of what it means to be a collection of believers, to be a church, to follow Jesus. We arrive at Acts 2:42.

**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47**

There's some debate on whether this is descriptive or prescriptive, meaning, is this exactly the way that the church should always look? We have a tendency to romanticize this moment. But if you read through the Book of Acts, you quickly get the sentimentality smacked out of you when you realize that the church wasn't as perfect as it appears right here. Regardless of whether

this is descriptive or prescriptive, none of us are going to say that we shouldn't do the four things mentioned here.

I would guess that you can put those pieces together in different churches as different ways of expressing them. But you can see them in the life of the church; we do these things. In some ways, as we teach through the New Testament of both the words of Jesus and the apostles, we're devoting ourselves to them, to the fellowship, we connect with one another, we gather together. We recognize the uniqueness of when we get together, the breaking of bread. We have potlucks every once in a while, but we have meals together. We gather around tables and of course, the prayer. We've put in practice all of that in the presence of God. But did you notice in Acts 2:42-47, that of all the practices mentioned there, only one of them is repeated, and it's repeated three times?

In verse 42, it says they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. In verse 46, it says they broke bread. And later, in verse 46, it says they ate together. Now, remember, this is years before the printing press. You didn't necessarily have punctuation. Space on paper was at a premium, so if you wanted to emphasize something, you would do it by repetition. If the author is repeating this practice of breaking bread together to talk about the church and repeating it three times in the span of five verses, this is where the light should be flashing at you. Something is unique and important here. There's something about the table.

I encourage you as you read through the New Testament to pay attention to the greetings and salutations of the New Testament letters, in which the authors hint at how the first church was gathering. Often, you see, "Give thanks to Priscilla whose home you are meeting in," or "...when they welcomed me into their home." Or "As you eat around this table, I say hello." It's all of these little indications that point to the very first organizing structure of the church was at the table. It was the place in which they gathered.

Part of that was unique to their circumstances. When you're in Rome and it's occupied land in which you're an oppressed people on the run, you can't necessarily have a church building. So, there was a necessity to meet at homes. Later, as Christianity was legalized, and we can talk at a different time about if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but it did afford the availability for the church to gather in buildings, to start creating synagogues and churches in which to gather.

It moved subtly away from the table, and the center point of the gathering of the church moved into a setting not quite like this but similar. You can trace the history. This isn't moralizing it; I'm just saying it's the history of what has happened of how we went from the table to the altar, or the Eucharist mass to the pulpit as the center, to now this church is really orchestrated in some ways like a theater. It's set up to experience it up here. None of this

is good or bad. It just is. You can watch the way the organizing function of the church has shifted.

Now, whether that's good or bad is a different discussion. But my point is that if you look at Acts and the history of how this has shifted, I wonder if we have drifted from this practice of breaking bread together that was so central to those early followers of Jesus. Something has shifted. I wonder if we're in need of a return to this practice that appeared so central to the early church and yet now is more adjacent to how the church operates.

What was it about the table in Acts 2 that was so central? It's clear that the presence of God was revealed, but there's something about it. So, I want to explore what happens around the table. What is it that Jesus would constitute this practice at the table as something that is dedicated to how we, as followers of Jesus, are called to gather around? There are three things I want to highlight.

### **At the Table, We Are United**

The first one is that at the table, we are united. This is a really important point because one of the moves of the early church was that Jesus was calling disciples from all sorts of different backgrounds. Meals in the ancient world and even in our world today tend to be boundary markers, in which those you eat with are a signal to who you're welcoming and accepting, and those you choose not to eat with indicate those you're keeping at a distance.

What happens then when Jesus starts calling all of these different people from all sorts of different backgrounds and says, "Hey, you're welcome at the table." Well, the table gets messy. It gets complicated. Have you ever had that experience at home, or was the table always clean, nice, and tidy?

There is a story that's become somewhat of a legend in my home. I'm the youngest of three, so I don't remember this story, but it's taken on a life of its own. My older brother and sister were at the table fighting over something. They were fighting over a glass cup that was filled with something. Dad got his elevated voice up and said, "Kids, drop it!" My brother and sister, at that exact moment, did exactly what he asked and dropped it. It shattered, and water was everywhere. That tends to be the experience of the table. It's messy. It's hard. My brother and sister, and certainly me, although I wasn't old enough, were in process.

We screw things up, but what's unique about the table is it wasn't like that happened, and we never ate together again. I'm sure that they had to get the broom out and sweep it up. My sister probably had to scrub up the water that was there, but what happened was we returned to the table. The table, when done well, is a place where you don't push away from it and walk away, but you work through your differences. You work through your challenges.

The gift of a family eating together is they don't have anywhere else to go. They're stuck there. Yeah, they can retreat to their room. They can retreat to a device, but the reality is the table binds people together. It's where community is catalyzed.

We often forget that one of the ways you can translate the word salvation is the word healing, which means when you come to salvation, it's about the healing of your whole soul. So last week, I talked about this phrase from Brennan Manning, which says that "God loves us as we are, not as we should be, because none of us are as we should be." That is fundamentally true of God. But it also means that a bunch of broken people in need of healing come together in a room and try to live life together. That's going to be a problem.

What we tend to forget is that this rough-edged community, the conflicts and tensions that ensue, are actually the raw material for growth. If we don't have conflict, we tend not to grow. You have to understand how to walk through conflict well. Conflict is one of the ways in which God matures us as we learn what it means to forgive and to reconcile, to extend forgiveness, and receive forgiveness. Because at the heart of the table is really the practice of love.

When we gather, we are a diverse people. We come from different backgrounds, thoughts, intentions, voting patterns, and socioeconomic status. We all are a diverse people trying to figure out how to maintain community. How do we hold this together?

I want to demonstrate what that first table was like because there's a way in which one can romanticize it. Jesus' table with the disciples. Jesus at the table. How hard could it have been? Of course, it was going to be clean and tidy. Well, let's look at this. In Matthew 10:2-4. It is the list of the disciples who were at the table with Jesus.

**These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Matthew 10:2-4**

What we don't know without really digging in is that there are a lot of differences around this table. First, economic differences. Peter and Andrew were fishermen, likely from a lower middle-class background. Their profession was around hard labor, and they probably managed a modest living. But at the same time, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also a fishing family. But we learn in a different text that they had servants, which would indicate they were in a very well-to-do fishing family. So right there, same profession, one with quite a bit more success than the other, and so you wonder if that ever popped its head up.

There were regional differences. The disciples came from all over the area, from Galilee and Judea. Each would have had cultural differences and distinctions. Some are more rural, others are more urban; all these would have been ripe for the internal tensions that take place in community. But my favorite example of the tension that was at the table was between two characters on Matthew's list and the only two that are given qualifiers or descriptors. There was Simon, the zealot, and Matthew, the tax collector.

Let's start with Simon. What does it mean that he was a zealot? A zealot, which was this far right-wing Jewish insurgency group that wanted to overthrow Rome. They went about that desire through violent guerrilla terrorist-like activity. They would walk through crowds, and they became known as the Sicarii, which translates to the dagger men because the zealots would walk in these large crowds with daggers under their cloaks. And as they walked around the crowd, they'd pull the dagger out, stab Roman officials, and then disappear into the crowd. This was Simon, the zealot.

Now, think of the other one, Matthew, the tax collector. We talked a little bit about this a few weeks ago. We talked about Zacchaeus, but tax collectors, particularly Matthew, were the ones who were working for Rome. He was a Jewish one, and he defected and started working for the oppressors. Matthew was on the Roman payroll. He was one who would sell out to work for Rome. The way he made money was by collecting the taxes for Rome but then putting on top of their heavy tax his own heavy tax, which he would then pocket. So here at the table, you have Simon the Zealot, who came from a people who had a tendency to kill Roman officials, and you have Matthew the tax collector who worked for Rome.

You thought your small group was difficult. Can you imagine the tensions around that table? Those two people were split by ideological differences, and certainly, their zeal and passion would have played out in all sorts of ways. I mean, can you imagine Matthew thinking Simon is a murderer, and Simon thinking Matthew is a traitor? There was something about the table, the presence of Jesus, that held this together.

The table is where we're united. Where there's something higher, an allegiance that transcends all of those lower allegiances in which we find ourselves constituted as a community and a family around the table, not committed to those other allegiances but to the allegiance of Jesus. It's that table that ultimately unites us as a people. I would suggest if it can hold Matthew and Simon together, it can certainly hold whatever differences we hold in this room.

### **At the Table, We are Formed**

Secondly, at the table, we're formed. You can imagine that tension that takes place around the table will have a way in which

you can be shaped more into Christ's likeness, or you can go the other way, but it provides the opportunity for you to grow in your maturity to Christ. One of the tragic fallouts within the church world for the past five years has been what sociologists called the big sort.

What they've watched, given all the tension—racial, political, and COVID-19 is that many churches are beginning to self-select into ideological enclaves because their church didn't posit whatever philosophy or idea or didn't handle this issue the way they wanted or that issue they thought should happen. People left churches and simply went to places in which people thought similar to them. We're not talking about core doctrinal differences; that's a different conversation. When we're talking about these social issues, this separating and dividing amongst them to enclaves in which you all think the same, one of the disservices is it doesn't give you the chance to practice unity around a table.

I'd suggest it actually malforms you. You get more used to eating with people and drinking with people who are just like you. To not be able to hold differences, to not recognize that your allegiance to Jesus is higher than all those other allegiances. Dallas Willard used to call the church the school of love. He said it was because it's one of those places in which you gather, and it's not the school of love because it's perfect. It's the school of love because all of these differences create the conditions in which you can learn what it means to love other people who don't look like you, think like you, talk like you, vote like you, or spend like you.

It's around the table that when we commit to being present and not pushing back from the table and walking away, we learn how to forgive, how to reconcile, how to learn patience, how to learn joy, and how to have peace, all those different qualities. Where are you going to learn them if you never live in a place where there's differences? At the table, one of the ways we grow is we're exposed to differences.

You find the rawness of your own heart, the shadow sides, the dark sides of who you are when they bump up against the brokenness of other people. When you commit to that community, when you commit to life around the table, your insidiousness in your heart is exposed. You then have the opportunity to do something with that, to lay it at the feet of Jesus and at that community, to be forgiven, embraced, welcomed, and restored, or you can flee and leave the community for something that better fits your fancy, that fits your own particularities.

You will be exposed in community, and others will experience that as well. But you will be given the chance to be welcomed into community. When done right, we are hurt and broken in community, but we're also healed in community. The only way we find genuine healing is when we are welcomed into the presence of Jesus, forgiven by his death alone, and embraced in his new humanity in that community where we find life and healing.

## **At the Table, We Experience a Foretaste of the Kingdom of God**

Lastly, the one I already mentioned, at the table, we experience a foretaste of the kingdom of God. There is something beautiful when we commit to being with one another in which the kingdom of God takes root in a unique way, and you get a foretaste of what you will experience for eternity.

The prophets constantly talked about eternity and the new creation as a creation that's made up of all tribes and nations gathered around the banquet feast of the Lamb or the messianic table. Listen to this from Isaiah 25, it says,

**On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Isaiah 25:6-8**

The vision in which this whole story is going is about a renewed creation, a renewed world that's right here in this one. Yet we gather and feast with one another in the presence of God. Jesus says that when you do this now, you get a foretaste of what's to come. I don't think it's just poetic. I think there's some truth to it. When you gather around a table with fellow believers and break bread, like we've been doing for 2000 years, submitted to the presence of God around that table, what you find is something transcendent.

This whole week, as I've been preparing this message, I couldn't help but share Jesus' words in John 13, which he's speaking to his disciples. He's talking about the way he's going to be betrayed, arrested, and killed. Jesus looks at this table and says, "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34-35).

Jesus' command to the church is that the way people will know that we belong to Jesus is through how we love one another. I don't know of a better place to learn that than around a table. By welcoming one another, welcoming those near and far from God, gathering together, and holding unity. Allowing our truest selves to be formed into the image of Christ together.

There's something there that gives us a taste of what's to come. So the invitation is clear. It's before us to eat together and feast together. What would it look like for you this week to invite someone who's sitting in this room over for dinner, gather around a table, and enjoy and celebrate life in the presence of Jesus?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2024 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No.1488-3FC