

WORSHIP

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Back to School: The Cafeteria

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Luke 14:7-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-34

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

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For the past few weeks we've been in a sermon series called Back to School. By this time, all of our school-aged members are back in the swing of things. This morning at church, we started a new program year – with new classes.

The invitation in this Back to School series is to consider the Christian faith as a lifelong journey of learning and discovery rather than a set of beliefs that we are supposed to accept or, one day, "get." In the same way that Jesus met his disciples along the road, inviting them



to “come and follow,” we are invited to continue our growth and understanding about this Christian life.

Today we conclude our series with two readings about table manners. We heard Katelyn read a parable that Jesus told about where to sit at the banquet. Our second reading is from First Corinthians where we find the Apostle Paul sharing words that we speak every time we gather as a church family at the communion table.

Listen with me for the word of the Lord. I am reading from the 11th chapter.

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A few weeks ago I started my sermon with a confession that around this time of year, when there is energy and excitement around starting a new year of school, I tend to have a recurring nightmare about needing to take and pass a math test (in spite of the fact that I haven't taken a math class for 23 years). A number of you, demonstrating your capacity for empathy, told me you had (and have) similar nightmares. But one of you, and I will not divulge who, decided to up the ante. This member – who teaches college mathematics – sent me an **18-page** math problem on “fair-bold singular functions.” Even scrolling through the numbers and symbols of the document made me break out in a cold sweat.

Regardless of your aptitude for math, one experience that I imagine almost all of us have had as students at school is the flood of anxiety that comes at the very beginning of the year when we first make our way into the cafeteria for lunch.

I remember it was in late-August of 1989. Back then, the actor Will Smith was known as the Fresh Prince of Bel Air. I was a seventh grader at Randolph Junior High – which, at that time, went from 7th- 9th grade.

I was skinny, clumsy, and embarrassingly tall. All I wanted to do was blend into the crowd which is a hard thing to do when you look more like a giraffe than a 12-year-old. I was overwhelmed by the changes we had to navigate coming from elementary school. Lockers with combinations. One to the right, two to the left, one to the right. Higher expectations for homework. More responsibility. And then there was lunch.

The Randolph Junior High School cafeteria was a 45 minute unstructured, unbridled social experiment. Instead of being told where to sit at tables assigned by grade and teacher, the cafeteria was the wild, wild west. If you've ever read the book, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, or seen the movie *Mean Girls*, you can imagine how the room was divided up. Up a half-flight of stairs in a lofted part of the cafeteria were the students we aspired to be: the varsity football and basketball players, the cheerleaders, the pretty people with their pastel-Polo shirts, their leather-weaved belts that were long enough to tuck into a half-knot and drape down their leg which held up their Duck Head khaki shorts.



On the regular floor were a few tables of the soccer players with their shaggy hair and Adidas gazelles. Then there were the drama kids. And the band. A few tables for the unaffiliated. And, in the front corner, the Dungeons and Dragons crowd. It was a veritable caste system – and as I emerged from the lunch-line clutching my tray of food – I had no idea where to sit or how to act.

Over time, of course, I figured it out. I learned to pack my lunch – so that I could walk into the cafeteria with a friend and immediately find a table. I bought a leather-weaved belt and made sure it was long enough to properly tuck. I joined the track team – which is the sport the football players do in the spring. I had set my eyes on the prize – and by the time I left Randolph I had a regular table up that half-flight of stairs in the loft. It almost felt like I had earned it. A place of honor. And once I had established that place, frankly, I stopped noticing the awkward seventh grade kids who came out of the lunch-line clutching their trays looking frantically around the room for a place to sit.

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For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’

I would venture that almost 100% of the time you have heard someone say those words standing behind a communion table they are spoken gently, with warmth, with grace. These are the words we call “the words of institution” for the Lord’s Supper – a part of Scripture that we quote every time we share the bread and cup as a family of faith at communion.

What you may not know is that when Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth, he was frustrated. You kind of get that sense when you hear Paul talk about those who eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner being answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. I’m not sure what that means, but it doesn’t sound good, does it?

At first blush, it almost sounds as if Paul is saying that you have to be pure...and worthy...to come take a seat the Lord’s table. But, in fact, that is not what Paul means. You don’t come to the Lord’s table because you are worthy. You come to the Lord’s table because you are hungry. You don’t come because you are pure. You come because you are invited.

Before the Panther’s kick-off later this afternoon, go back and read some the verses that precede these familiar words about communion. The reason Paul was frustrated was because the people in his church who were gathering for worship and for communion were practicing the table manners they learned in the world – and those didn’t match up with what table manners looked like in church.

You see, in the early church, in Paul’s church, communion wasn’t a symbolic snack. It was a real meal. A fellowship supper. And what was happening when Paul wrote this letter is that



the people in Corinth who had all the best seats at the other tables around town – those who had the status, the wealth, the title, the privilege – these were the people who showed up first for the meal...because they could. And they took their place of privilege, and they ate the food and drank the wine and it was like they felt they had earned it...that they were entitled to it. But then, when the others showed up...those who didn't have the status, those who didn't have the title, those who didn't have the wealth, those who didn't have the privilege... they didn't get to eat. And that made Paul frustrated. Because that's not church. And that's not the kind of table that Jesus set for those who followed him.

How did Jesus say it?

When you are invited to a banquet, do not sit in the place of honor. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

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Paul reminded the church about the table that Jesus set because he wanted to cast a vision for a different way of living and behaving in the world.

“My brothers and sisters,” Paul said, “when you come together to eat, wait for one another.”

That sounds simple, doesn't it?

Wait for one another.

When you come together to eat – wait for one another.

Keep in mind, Paul isn't addressing masses of people. He's not writing an op-ed in the newspaper. He's writing to his church – a small group – encouraging **them** to practice a different way of living than what they see modeled in the world in which they live.

And the truth is, it can be hard to live differently. Because there's a lot about the lives we lead beyond this place that doesn't so much encourage us to “wait for one another.”

In fact, we are conditioned, from an early age, to strive for the opposite.

To look out at the people around us – and find ways we can move to the head of the line. To track into the right classes. To live in the right districts. To participate in the right extra-curriculars. To land the right internships. To move up the ladder. To join the right club. To connect with the right friends.

Speaking from experience, that's an easy pattern to fall into and it is an exceedingly hard pattern to break. Sometimes, it feels impossible...because it is bigger than our individual choices. It's the air we breathe.



Less than a mile from here, to the west, lies the historic Elmwood Cemetery. Opened in 1853, Elmwood is one of the oldest and largest public cemeteries in the city. Sixty years ago, what we know as Elmwood was actually three cemeteries: There was Elmwood, where white citizens of some prominence were buried. On the outskirts of the Elmwood was Potter's Field, where white citizens of less prominence were buried. And there was Pinewood, where black citizens of Charlotte were buried. A chain link fence separated Pinewood and Elmwood cemeteries. The fence came down in January of 1969 by action of the city council with the Mayor casting the deciding vote.

It seems in life – and in death – we are people steeped in concern about finding that place of honor. That table set apart. The one we feel like we've earned. That we deserve.

Paul knew the church could be different.

He knew the church had to be different – because Jesus didn't reserve seats at the table for those who got ahead. He shared the table with those who were hungry...and that's all of us.

When the church of Jesus Christ is at its best, we offer an alternative reality than the world around us. And we do that, it is powerful, and powerfully compelling.

Earlier this spring I received an email from a woman I had never met who sat in these pews for the past four years. She emailed to tell me her story.

She had grown up in a church in another state. She went to college, got her doctorate, and worked as a professor at a state university. Was married, had kids, and raised them in the church. She was elder – a leader – who worked hard and faithfully on some of the thorny issues that are part of what it means to live together in Christian community.

A few years ago, however, she had become disillusioned with the church. She started noticing that people were joining her church to be seen. Because it was a mark of prestige. She noticed the conversations were changing – from where the people could serve and grow, to what people could get, and with whom they could network. It worried her so much that she quietly drifted away.

And then she took a job at UNC Charlotte, and one Sunday God nudged her heart, and she came here.

What she experienced here was welcome. She emailed me to thank **you** for rekindling her faith and her hope for what the church could be. Here she experienced the warmth of Christian community. She grew in her love for God, she stretched in her understanding of grace, she connected to the places that Christ uses our church as his hands and feet in this city and our world.

She decided to write because she retired and was moving with her husband to be closer to her kids. "Sunday was my last day to worship with you," she wrote, "and I just want you to be



aware that every week there is someone like me sitting in your pews who needs to feel the welcome that I experienced in this place.”

We don't always get it right.

And we are constantly fighting against the patterns we've learned in our lives away from this place.

But we do it pretty well...

So what if our goal was that every time somebody – anybody – came through those doors – looking a little nervous – wondering where to sit – and if they had a place – what if we could wait for them? Welcome them? Include them? Listen to them? Learn from them?

Doesn't that sound like church?

