

Breadth, Length, Height, Depth
Genesis 2.18-24; Ephesians 3:14-4:6
October 7, 2018
World Communion Sunday
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Any spare moment we have right now is spent spackling, sanding, painting, cleaning, hauling, and packing. We haven't even gotten to installing the floors yet, but I'm sure the sermon illustration is coming just as soon as my beloved and I spend a week clicking floor panels together. The process of renovating and moving is tedious and tiring, for sure, but there's also the gift that comes in packing a home in all that handling and holding possessions. Before you pack, you first relive their story—a wedding gift from a friend, a brilliant thrift store find, pottery thrown by my husband, art created by my children. Rediscovering family photos and the moments they capture. All of these *things* around us representing a life together. We've packed all of the books and most of the china, some of the art, and all of the tupperware. But one of the very last things standing will be the dining room table.

Walls can be empty, cupboards can be bare, beds can be stripped of frames and headboards, but the dining room table will stay in place until the final moment, and then be immediately moved and ready to serve again in its groovy new digs. If all goes according to plan, we'll eat breakfast at that table in one part of town and gather around it, likely with pizza and paper plates, for dinner at the lakefront. The essentials of life happen at table.

The table itself belonged to my great-grandmother who left it to my mother who gave it to me. So many hands clasped in prayer, reaching around that table before a meal. So many tenders-of-family setting places, arranging flowers, squeezing in an extra chair, serving one more slice of pound cake before the meal was over. Add to that *my* family's multi-purpose use of this table, and at that table we have practiced multiplication tables, created slime from glue and shaving cream, sewn curtains and quilts, played games with friends, had sometimes hilarious and sometimes gut-wrenching conversations. Our table is where we gather our people to be fed in all kinds of ways.

We need gathering places and feeding places. We need places where we can show up as we are—ready to laugh, ready to weep, ready to break bread, ready to scream, ready to be still and rest, ready to talk until all hours. We need to know a chair is waiting and a place has been set for us to come and sit, planning to stay awhile, lingering in the company of beloveds. We need tables that sing and whisper and hum with the promises of the breadth, length, height, and depth of God’s love.

I am tired of hearing about the too small tables set by and for only a powerful few. My fatigue feels like a holy exhaustion. I want to flip those tables over the way Jesus did in the temple all those year ago. I could be “daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief” as the Talmudic saying¹ goes, but we keep setting these other tables. And there’s something about the way we set tables that sends me right back to the heart of hope.

World Communion Sunday is, as church history goes, a relatively new addition to the calendar, and an optional one at that. It is a reminder of our interconnectedness. The ways in which people of faith gather around tables like ours not just in this city and in this nation, but around the globe. Every shade of skin tone, every range of voice, every shape of body, every presentation of gender and sexuality, from modest tables set with only pennies to share to decadent tables set with hand-polished silver and funded by overflowing endowments; at each of these tables, the elements are set by loving hands, and prayers are prayed from sincere hearts. Words of institution are spoken by women and men who are carrying the hopes and dreams and fears of a people and laying them down right there alongside the common cup. Bread and wine are laid out for millions of global neighbors who are our siblings in faith. When I am angry and afraid of the too small tables being set by and for a powerful few, I have this story to bring me back to hope.

At our table, we tell the stories of scripture, remembering together: it is not good for us to be alone. We were made and shaped for life together. The very good-ness

¹ “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” - Talmud (Paraphrase of Rabbi Rami Shapiro's interpretive translation of Rabbi Tarfon's work on the Pirke Avot 2:20)

of creation is a swirling blend of God-breathed image bearing and Divinely formed community. We are made for bigger tables. We are made to name and welcome, increase and multiply. We are made as co-creators who delight in welcoming more to share life with us in the same way The Source of our being delights in welcoming us.

We need *this* day, on *this* weekend, at *this* moment in the story of the nation around us, to remind us of what our best and better story is. At our table, we tell the story of a God who expands, welcomes, delights, and draws near. Our story is one of human beings learning what it is to be fully human with the mark of God placed within each one of us. At our table, we tell the story of a love that cannot be stopped or slowed or legislated into smaller form. As Paul prayed for his friends, “with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.”

Friends, this table is better. It’s growing. It’s waiting for more beloveds to join us. This table challenges us to be our best selves but also welcomes us when we’re being a pretty lousy shadow of self, too. This table is good. And it’s healing. And it tells us what is true about God and about each other and about this beautiful, tender, broken world we love and call home.

Think of all of those tables where you have eaten and laughed and found courage. Maybe there are too many to count—the friends, the family, the neighbors, the overflowing love of so many good people. Or maybe you don’t have too many tables to count, and you carry pain and isolation because the too small tables weren’t being set for you. May that not be what you find here today.

Whatever your story may be, my hope is that the tables here are broad and wide, winding and swirling to always make room for one more. My prayer is that when you join us at this table of the better story, you will discover the love is overflowing. My hope is that we make room for everyone who wants to dine with us. My hope is that our tables, particularly this table before us in worship today, draw us into the spirit of power and love that runs in our family.

May you feel that spirit today. May the meal that we share awaken God's gift in you.² May the bread and the cup support you in the course of your journey. May you accept a holy call to bold action and service for the good of God's kingdom and the healing of this world. May you resist the temptation to give up on the enormity of the world's great need and release the fear that prevents you from moving boldly with freedom and grace and peace in this world, demanding tables be set for all and not just a powerful few. May you remember you were breathed into being by the God who loves and welcomed, formed for partnership and holy collaboration, created to conspire for the world's goodness. At this table, may you know the love of Christ—reach out and experience the breadth, test its length, plumb the depths, rise to the heights. May you be fed so well that you then live into the fullness of God.

The table has been set, and there is room for you today. Amen.

² http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2003-08-01