



HOW BIG IS OUR TABLE?

October 6, 2019, World Communion Sunday

Luke 9:10-17

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Picture this. You are 13 years old and suffering from the gangly growing pains of most 13 year olds. You moved over the summer and it is your first day at a brand new school. Somehow you have survived wandering the halls and finding your first few classes. But now the ultimate challenge lies before you: Lunch. You sheepishly enter into the boisterous and bustling cafeteria and make it through the food line with a minimum of bumbling.

But now, where to sit? As other students leave the lunch line they are energetically waved over to tables to find a place with their friends. Where to sit? Tables are quickly filling up. Where to sit? You try to casually approach a table with an empty seat but the students sitting there give you a less than welcoming look and you just keep walking. Where to sit?

If we have not had this specific experience, most of us have had some experience of struggling to find our place in a new context and sometimes just wishing there was a hole in the ground to swallow us up. You do not have to be 13 and in a cafeteria to feel awkward and excluded.

This morning I want to tell you about a friend of mine, a fellow member of the Moveable Feast, actually someone Kim and I both knew pretty well. His name was KC Ptomey. KC was a lifelong Presbyterian minister, a mentor to me, and a leader in our denomination. It was one of my greatest honors to preach at his church in Nashville about 20 years ago. I returned to that sanctuary for his memorial service several years ago where Ted Wardlaw shared two important stories about KC. Ted told of a large family birthday party on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.



There is a picture of KC with a cake and a glass of wine in front of him. “He was vintage KC! Red in the face like a banty rooster, smiling broadly, fierce and spirited in his joy in that moment, so thrilled to be there that his hands were outstretched as if he wished to embrace that whole table, peopled by those whom he loved most dearly.” When you go to rent a house on the Outer Banks, there are all sorts of amenities to think about. Do you want a house directly on the ocean, one with a view of the sound, one with a rooftop deck or hot tub? When KC was picking out a house, he had only one requirement – a dining table big enough for his entire extended family to gather around. No one was to be exiled to some card table on the side. Everyone needed a place around the table. Everyone.

This was driving force in KC’s entire life. Everyone deserved a place at the table. Back in the early 1960s KC was a student at what is now called Rhodes College. Ted told this story, “These were still days of deeply defended segregation in the South...and many churches there had strict policies against welcoming people of color to worship. Lines were deeply drawn between the white establishment and the other races; but change was in the air. And one Sunday, three white students, including KC...went with African-American students to worship at Second Presbyterian Church, the largest and most powerful Presbyterian church in town. These three students went with three students of color on a Sunday morning to worship at that church, and at the doors of that church, they were all turned away. It was church policy.

Almost immediately, the story hit Associated Press and United Press International, and it ricocheted around the country and across our communion. The Presbyterian General Assembly was to have had its annual meeting at that church in the following year, and, because of this story’s power, leaders in our communion elected another venue for the General Assembly. A historian who recounted this story to me, said that it was huge in those days to defy the cultural norms like that. “These young men were bravely defiant,” he said. “They risked their necks; they could have been beaten up...Even as a college student, KC had to do something; because the table wasn’t large enough.”



Today is World Communion Sunday. The day we celebrate the sacrament with an eye toward our family of faith across the globe joining in this sacred moment together. Often when we celebrate communion we picture that upper room, with Jesus and the twelve gathered around the table. There is a powerful intimacy to the image. But today I would like us to shift our line of sight to Jesus feeding the five thousand. This, too, is a sacramental moment, a scene that is infused with the holy. Just as during the Lord's Supper, Jesus blesses the bread, and breaks it, feeding all those around him. Except this time there is not solely a small room with a dozen chosen guests, but instead a field filled to overflowing, with whomever wished to be there. All are welcome. All are fed. And there is even more left over. No matter how many came, from anywhere, no matter who they were, they were fed by Jesus. This too, is a symbol of the feast in which we are about to share this morning.

Over the years some have tried to put a fence around the table. They have sought to control who receives an invitation and who does not. It has been said that if you do not belong to a particular denomination, you are not welcome to come to the table. It has been said that unless you have engaged in appropriate confession you are not welcome to come to the table. As we just heard, it has been said that the color of one's skin has decided who is welcome to come.

Those are just several of the obvious ways people have been kept from this table. There are other, less obvious, ways people are kept away. Sometimes people think that because they have doubts they are not welcome at the table. Sometimes people feel unwelcome because the other people worshipping seem too different from who they are, or too intimidating, or not particularly friendly. There are all sorts of assumptions people make about why they may not be welcome.

The multitude of reasons people have for not coming to this table span all of Christian history and the reaches of the globe. The question I would put before us and every church in the world this morning is this, "Is our table big enough?"



Have we done everything we can to ensure that there is a seat at this table for one and all? Like KC, have we made it a priority that no one ever feels that they are being relegated to sitting at the kids' table, at some card table nearby but not at **the** table?

And of course when I say "the table," I do not solely mean Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The table represents all of the ways we are called together as the Body of Christ. Are we welcoming one and all to this particular Christian community? Are we welcoming and inviting one and all to our worship, our Bible Studies, our mission service, our fellowship, our life together?

In the passage we just heard, the crowds come looking for Jesus. One might think that welcoming people to the table is no more than just not turning them away. But we need to remember that the reason those crowds came was because Jesus and the disciples had been traveling through the countryside, going to meet the people where they lived, teaching them and healing them and showing them how deeply valuable they were. It would be foolish not to recognize that every last one of those five thousand had been invited by Jesus. He had gone out and extended an invitation. He had promised that the table was big enough for all of them. And when they came he made sure they were fed, one and all.

Is our table here at Brick Church big enough? Have we gone out and spread the Word that all are welcome? Brick Church's history has always been one of traveling to where our people are live, changing our location from Beekman Street, to Fifth Avenue at 37th, and then to our home here on Park avenue. As Brick Church moves into its next era, there is no talk of leaving this magnificent building. But who are our people for this next era, who else could join us at the table? How are we traveling to them? How are we offering them hospitality? How might we more fully invite our neighbors from Yorkville to the table? How might we more intentionally include the unchurched in our midst to the table? How might we more proactively draw in young adults and singles to the table? How might we more fully welcome our neighbors from East Harlem to the table?



It is with great joy that I have watched our fledgling relationship with Church of the Living Hope and others in East Harlem slowly deepen and grow. We need them at our table and we need to be at their table. If we are to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we have things to learn from each other. If we are to be disciples of Christ, we too must go out and meet people where they are in hopes of creating opportunities to learn and to heal. We too must share the bounty He has blessed and broken ensuring that all can be fed.

In these recent months we as a community of faith have had to come to grips with some serious financial limitations and hard decisions were made. As we step into the future, we would be mistaken to equate current financial limitations with limitations of the Spirit to move us forward and out into the world.

Those disciples worried there was not enough to feed the crowd before them. But what Jesus blessed and broke was more than enough. There was room for everyone around the table. And there needs to be room around our table for 13 year olds and empty nesters, for hedge fund managers, and those who live paycheck to paycheck, for those who struggle to believe and those who have a hard time fitting in.

Each one of us needs to ask these questions, “Is our table big enough?” and “What am I doing to invite others to this table?” The one thing of which we can be assured, when Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, there is always enough, more than enough.

Thanks be to God. Amen.