

## WHO'S AT MY TABLE?

Matthew 14:13-21

A Sermon by Audrey Webber

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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Who is at my table?

This is the question we are pondering today as we continue our theme of Not Such Ordinary Time. I am sure you have asked this ordinary question many times without thinking that this is the question you have asked yourself. Who is at my table in terms of who have I chosen to live with whether a partner, a spouse, parents, a roommate, or a child? Who are the people who consistently fill my space and my home? Or maybe the question of who do I choose to talk with on the phone or over Zoom or who are the people who I choose to follow on social media? Even more - who are the people who I choose to listen to? What do they look like? Do they look and sound just like me? As a person of privilege am I including marginalized voices?

In this not so ordinary time, we have to think creatively in terms of restrictions of what our physical tables look like. We also most importantly have to think who are the people who I have excluded from these tables?

These are the questions to ask as we ponder the overarching question - *who is at our individual and collective tables?*

In this well-known miracle story that Barbara just read for us, and apart from Holy Week, the only miracle story mentioned in all four of the Gospels - we have to first, before even approaching the story, consider what it is that the host of this large table has experienced.

Directly before this elaborate banquet with an astounding miracle - Jesus had experienced a devastating trauma - he had lost his dear friend and cousin, John the Baptist, who was killed by decapitation. Jesus has lost the one person who understands his ministry the best and has lost him in one of the most horrible of ways. Jesus longs to grieve this dear person with whom he was integrally connected.

This is what *Jesus* brings to the table.

We always have to acknowledge what it is we each bring to the table - our traumas, our privileges, our languages, our geographic locations from which we come, our own personalities. We must acknowledge the imperfection of it all and also the beauty of the differences. Once we have acknowledged this - once we have acknowledged that our experiences could not be more different - that as a person of privilege - as a white female I can never know what my black sister or brother has experienced - that I cannot know what it is like to be a part of any particular group - then we can sit at the table. At that table I can then begin the act of hospitality as a host - just as Jesus imagined being a host in a whole new way. Because it is Jesus who says to the disciples this powerful command: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

Some of you might know of Saint Benedict of Nursia who was known for creating what would later be known as Benedictine communities, but even more he is known for his writing “The Rule of St. Benedict” which describes the importance of living a balanced life as a monk and as a believer. Within his larger Rule, he had many rules about what hospitality according to our faith means. Here are four of his “rules” as described in his writing:

1. “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’” —The Rule of St. Benedict 53:1
2. “Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the community are to meet the guest with all the courtesy of love.” —The Rule of St. Benedict 53:3
3. “Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received.” —The Rule of St. Benedict 53:15
4. “Let us open our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with attentive ears the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us, ‘Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.’” —The Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue 29

Benedictine communities often speak about what is called radical hospitality and how essential it is to their communities. It is a form of hospitality that goes beyond the welcoming of others but takes it a step further to acknowledge that not only do you welcome them in but you do the hard work of learning their story and truly inviting all to the table as equal partners in the life of the church and community - not as guests to be had for a period of time. In a book titled *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* by Lonni Collins Pratt she says this of this kind of hospitality:

The phrase radical hospitality refers to the activities and desires that inspire individuals and communities to welcome those who are unlike themselves. Rather than viewing any person in terms of how they benefit us, radical hospitality means accepting the person with no thought of personal benefit. Instead of seeking persons who will support the congregation, actively seek persons who need the support of the congregation. To become hospitable means finding ways to welcome the marginalized, forgotten, and misunderstood among us.<sup>1</sup>

As she alludes to, this form of hospitality lifts up that we need to welcome all to the table not because of a personal gain - not to have them there as a form or tokenism or because it makes us feel better to have them there but because we truly need each other. I read this brief anecdote written by one member of a Benedictine community as an example of radical hospitality:

At our food pantry, we have a children’s corner. It is filled with books and toys for the children to play and even choose something to bring home. One evening, little James waved me over to meet his new purple stegosaurus. He explained, “See the missing eye? He’s been through a lot. I’ve been through a lot, too, so I chose him. We’ll stay together.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lonni Collins Pratt with Father Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love*, Paraclete Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Atkinson, Benedictine Center, <https://www.benedictinecenter.org/radical-hospitality-2/>

At each of our own tables as well as our collective tables, it is essential that we acknowledge who is there and how we view those who are at the table. We then must note how we are acting at each of our tables once our guests have arrived.

Are we doing these four things:

Are we listening? As Barbara spoke about a couple weeks ago, are we choosing to listen to the eternal listener as well as the neighbors next to us.

Secondly, are we healing? Both ourselves as well as others - are we allowing others to heal from the trauma of being absolutely persecuted because of who they are?

Third, are we loving? Are we truly loving through our actions and our words? Are we covering those at our table with the pure love that Christ gives to us at his table?

Fourth, are we then sharing? Are we sharing not only our food and our space, but are we sharing our own experiences? Also are we oversharing and cutting others off?

If we choose to listen, heal, love, and share then we are doing the very things that Jesus modeled for us and we are doing Jesus' call to dream bigger than we imagined possible. We are dreaming beyond the two fish and five loaves of bread that are at our table - we are imagining a table that encompasses more than those who we normally spend time with.

I would again like you to imagine who is at your table. Who are the people who fill it?

Do you have anyone at your table or is it a very small group? Do they all look and sound like each other? Do they enjoy the same food, art, music? What do their words sound like? Do they lift up other voices or do they prefer to hear themselves talk? As we imagine the feeding of the 5,000 and as we know many more than that - what did that table look like? We cannot answer the same questions about that particular table, but I have a feeling we have a good idea who Jesus would invite to his table. Now, we have to turn back to ourselves, the host, and ask all these same questions. Do my words sound like love? Do I lift up the voices of others at my table? Do I lift up marginalized voices? Do I seek justice?

I'm sure you have likely read John Lewis' indescribable piece of writing which he wrote hours before his death that was then published on the day of his funeral. If you haven't read it yet, I highly recommend you do so. You likely have seen the incredible line which has now been quoted countless times: "Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble." It is indeed at our ordinary tables where we can begin to create this vision for a world that is as Jesus imagines - a vision for a world that encompasses more than we ever imagined - a table whether virtual or physical - encompassing all people. We have to ask these questions of ourselves because, in fact, we are not the host. We are not the host of any of our tables at home, at church, or in our communities. It is Jesus who is the host of each of our tables and through each of us we try our best to do what Jesus asks each one of us. To proclaim his words that "They need not go away."

I would like to share with you these words one theologian describes of our story this morning:

The events that took place on that hillside in Galilee two thousand years ago were a miracle to the five thousand people assembled that day. However, the deeper message is the miracle of God's love for the six billion people on our planet today and the miracle that we are called to be partners with God in making fullness of life become a reality today for the world that God loves.<sup>3</sup>

As we imagine our own tables at home - our own tables which are serving as our offices at the moment. Our own tables which look a bit more digital than physical. Our own tables which are acting as our very own communion tables this morning. I want us to ask ourselves if Jesus was the host at our tables right here this day, would he approve the guest list? Would Jesus approve of the conversation starters we have proposed? Or would Jesus wonder: who have we excluded? Who have we spoken not well of simply because they are different than ourselves?

As we ask ourselves these questions, we can live in the hope that as Psalm 78 says "God can spread a table in the wilderness."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, God can spread a table even on our very imperfect, our very messy, our very unused, our very simple tables. As we bring ourselves to the communion table today, we bring not only ourselves but all of the hurts, all of the traumas, all of our privileges, and all of the people who we bring to our individual tables and we give it all to the host of the table. It is this host who spreads a miraculous table using what he is given and makes a miracle happen. It is Jesus who is at our table. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Clifton Kirkpatrick, [David L. Bartlett (2013). *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>4</sup> "They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" Psalm 78:19, NRSV