

Who Are We? Sermon Series
#3 – Why A Table?
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“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.” That is the identity statement of our denomination, which we are exploring in this sermon series. We’re trying to figure out what it means and what we, as individuals and as a congregation, are supposed to do about it. In the first sermon, we look at the word “movement” and came to a few conclusions: (1) to be a part of a movement you have to be moving, and (2) a movement is purposeful, it has a goal toward which it is moving. In the second sermon, we compared the concept of wholeness to a hyphen, we connects things together, as opposed to a slash, which keeps things apart. We concluded that a movement for wholeness seeks to make connections based on mutual respect and love.

Today, we move to the word “table.” This should be a no-brainer, right? I mean, it’s pretty obvious that the table is important to us as Disciples. We didn’t just put this piece of furniture here to improve the sanctuary aesthetics or because we needed a place to set our candles. There’s a reason the table is literally central to our worship experience. As one of the Sermon Talkback participants said, “Without the table, we wouldn’t be church.” Someone once said that a Disciples of Christ worship without communion is like taking a shower without turning on the water. And so, we do it weekly - communion, not taking a shower.

The importance of sharing a meal together at a table isn’t new to our denomination or the Christian faith. Eating is far more than just a biological necessity; there’s a deeper, soul-level meaning that gives a meal its importance. A meal can be a much-needed time of rest, refreshment, and especially relationship-building. We often talk about eating with someone as breaking bread together. In fact, the word “companion” literally means “to share bread with.” When we eat together, we are not just a group of individuals gathered at a table; through the act of sharing space and nourishment, we are companions.

The theology behind breaking bread has deep biblical roots. In the Hebrew scriptures, sharing a meal with someone often meant giving up a portion of your own sustenance, thereby acknowledging the inherent worth of the other person. It’s like saying, “I value you enough to share my life-giving food with you.” Of course, we know that God commanded the Israelites to share a meal on the night before they were rescued from slavery in Egypt, which became known as the Passover meal. And God provided bread from heaven for the Israelites as they wandered in the desert. “Give us this day our daily bread” has both spiritual and physical significance.

The New Testament is full of the sharing of meals. The feeding of the 5,000; the meal in Emmaus with the risen Christ; the sharing of the fish on the beach at the end of John’s gospel – all of these are significant events in the gospels which have as a central element the sharing of a meal. What did Jesus do on the last night of his life? He shared a meal with his closest companions in the Upper Room, which we remember each time we come to the table.

Our Disciples of Christ founders sought to reclaim that early view of the importance of the Lord’s Table in their worship. Not only did they believe in the weekly observance of communion, but they also believed that everyone who believed in Jesus was welcome at the table, regardless of their denominational affiliation. This idea of communion being open to everyone flew in the face of many denominations, and was one of the reasons Thomas Campbell

left the Presbyterians to start his own movement, which would eventually grow into the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

So what role does the table play in our movement for wholeness in this fragmented world? The idea of an open table fit nicely with another of our founding tenets, and that was the idea that we are all children of God, regardless of the earthly divisions we have created for ourselves. We believe that the concept of unity is our polar star, which guides us in how we live out our faith. Therefore, the table should be a place of connecting with each other, one big hyphen-shaped feature of our worship. The root for the word “communion” is the same for the word “community” and “communication.” Through communion, we communicate that we are a community, united together by our belief in Jesus Christ.

But wonderful paradox of the table is that it unites us in the midst of our diversity. We aren't called to fill out a questionnaire before we come to the table. We're not asked to demonstrate our spiritual fitness before we're given the bread and cup. There are no creeds to recite; there are no particular beliefs to which we must assent. On any number of political, social, or theological issues, you can believe what you believe and I can believe what I believe and we can be at complete opposite ends of the spectrum – and yet, we are both invited to the table.

And by doing so, by coming to the table together, something within us and between us is fundamentally transformed. In the movie “Babette’s Feast,” a political refugee named Babette finds shelter in a secluded seaside town in Norway. The people of the colorless town are very stoic, divided from each other over their differing beliefs and afraid to express their true emotions to each other. As a way of thanking the town for taking her in, Babette, an accomplished chef, decides to cook a lavish meal for everyone, including fine china, table linens, and the most sumptuous food imaginable. On the night of the feast, the townfolk come trudging into the dining room, barely acknowledging each other, and take their place at the table. And as Babette begins to serve the meal, something miraculous happens. The people who were once so cold and somber come to life with laughter and conversation as they break bread together. The two neighbors who have argued for years sit next to each other and tell stories. The elderly widow and widower who've always been afraid to express their interest in each other share “come hither” looks. This collection of individuals has been transformed by the table into a community.

That's what this table does. It takes the complex divisions our world has created and breaks them down into their simplest form – one human sharing a meal with another human. That's why we pass the trays. Don't look now, but you may be sitting next to someone you just don't like. I said don't look! But when they hand you a tray of bread and a tray of cups and share this meal with you, the two of you become companions, whether you choose to live that way or not.

This table at which we eat our Sunday meal extends well beyond these walls. The meaning behind the break we bread and the cup we share is too big to be contained in the sanctuary. It extends to every table at which we sit: the dinner table in our homes, the tables in restaurants or coffee shops, the tray tables in hospitals and nursing homes. At every table where we sit to eat, Christ is represented and re-presented through the bread we break. That's why I believe the easiest way to make connections in this world is over a meal. It's one thing to think critically of people whose behaviors or beliefs or Facebook posts are so different than ours. It's quite another thing to share a meal with Carlos or Stephanie or Husan, to hear about their struggles and their families and their faith, to put a face and a name and a story on our points of division. Through sharing a meal, our enemies can become our companions.

Another way this table extends beyond our sanctuary is in how it connects us with other believers around the world. When we come to the table, we do so with believers in Congo, who use Kool-aid and rice cakes, and with believers in Fiji who use Roti bread and pineapple juice. Around this table we restate our unity with Christians in China, in Chile, and in the Middle East. At the table, we make the bold statement that despite our human differences, we are one body woven together by our faith in Christ, and that bond of love is stronger than any divisions we choose to create. The bread and the cup we share help us remember the One who created us, the One who died for us, and the One who walks beside us, and help us remember that Spirit of God is found in each person we meet, regardless of how different from us they may seem.

That's an important reminder for us in a world where power rests with those who are in control. The Identity Statement says it succinctly: we welcome all to the Lord's Table. Not Crestwood's Table. Not your table or my table. This is the Lord's table. We are not the owners, we are simply the stewards, called to follow the operating instructions we've been given in scripture. Ultimately we are all guests who've been invited to break bread at this meal. Christ is present here, reminding us of the grace we have been given for the week behind us and the strength we've been given for the week ahead of us. I don't know about you, but I need that reminder. I need to remember that, regardless of what happened the last six days, regardless of the angry words, the poor decisions, the shortfalls, on that seventh day we will gather once again around a table to hear God's merciful word and taste God's gracious goodness. Communion doesn't magically wipe away our problems; it is simply a reminder that God is always with us. Communion's reliable presence in our worship mirrors God's reliable presence in our lives. In communion we renew our covenant with God each week; God promises to be with us, and we promise to honor God with our lives in the week ahead by seeking to work for wholeness.

I was in a denominational meeting once and we were discussing the relevance of the table for us as Disciples. We were also struggling to articulate what was distinctive about our understanding of the table. One lady, a representative of another denomination, said simply, "For Disciples, the table travels." In other words, the meaning of what happens here doesn't stay here. It travels with us into our lives, into the world, going with us where we go, offering grace and love and peace as we extend our hands to others. As we seek to be a movement in this fragmented world, we do not do this alone. The table travels. The meaning we find here goes with us when we leave this place to share God's love and make connections. Someone out there needs a companion, some to break bread with them and remind them they are loved by God. Who's going to take this table to them?