

Who, for the love of crumbs, gets to sit at your table?

When I was a boy, we would eat most of our Christmas and Thanksgiving meals at my grandparent’s house. Between all the aunts, uncles, and cousins, there were always a lot of us there, too many to sit at one table, so we’d have to set up an extra table in the living room and then figure out who was going to sit there. My grandparents, along with my great-grandmothers, all had seats at the regular table, where they sat every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. No one else would have thought to sit in those seats. Like walking into a restaurant and the host calls you by name and asks, “Would you like your usual table?” The restaurant could be jam packed, standing-room-only, and there would be this one empty table still. That’s where the grandparents sat. I’ll admit, as a boy, it was reassuring to know my grandparents wouldn’t move on me. That come dinner time, my grandfather would have a word of grace to offer over the food, and over us. And when dessert came, I always knew where to go to sneak one more bite. And yet, on big occasions, when we couldn’t all fit around one table, I always wondered why I had to sit in the other room.

Now, 30 years later, I don’t mind the kids table so much. We didn’t have to sit still the whole time, and if we didn’t want to finish our meal, we didn’t have to. That’s what my cousin Bruce was for. Invariably, when dinner was over, there was always more to pick up off the floor around the kids table, and this is when some adult would make an off-handed comment about the kids table, and we’d all say, “Don’t blame us, you’re the ones who wanted an adult table.”

Then, not too many years ago, when I was in my early 20s and the kids table had now become a young-adult table, one Thanksgiving, I remember my grandfather, upon coming to the table, sat down next to me. My grandfather had had a stroke about 4 year earlier that wiped out his left side. This meant he walked with a pronounced limp. It also meant that, being left-handed, he had to eat with his right hand, which was messy to watch, and embarrassing to him. He plopped down next to me and shot the whole table a look that said, I know I’ll be alright here.

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Yesterday was a beautiful day around here. Moira woke up in the morning with a thought to take the dog for a long hike somewhere. She asked Lillian and Rowan, “Do you want to go down to the Cape Cod Canal, over to Borderland State Park, or maybe we can drive up to Walden Pond?” The kids also had an offer to go with *their* grandfather, Moira’s dad, Dave, to United Prosthetics in Dorchester. Dave, you may recall, has two prosthetic arms that he was fitted with 5 years ago following an automobile accident that nearly claimed his life. Every now and then a wire will short or a band will snap in one of the arms, and the arms have to go back to the factory for a tune-up. This happened about 2 months ago. Since then, Dave, who has figured out how to feed himself, has had to go back to being fed, and having all the doors opened for him. Then finally, on Thursday, he got word that his arms were all fixed and ready-to-go. “It’s a big day for Grampy,” Lillian and Rowan announced. “We’re going to go with him.” Really? I thought. You’d rather drive to Dorchester and sit in an office than go hiking outside. But I guess they did, because they went.

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Last spring I was here in the sanctuary sitting in a circle with our confirmation students and their mentors. Some of us were sitting on chairs and some of us were sitting on the floor. The topic was communion. I set before the group a bag of Doritos, a package of Oreo cookies, and a plain loaf of bread. I also put out a bottle of *Coca-Cola*, a bottle of *Ocean Spray Cran-Apple*, and a no name brand bottle of grape juice. “Does it matter which of these products we use for communion?” I asked the group.

When we gather around the table on a Sunday morning to remember Jesus and to celebrate the gifts of God for the people of God, does it matter what the gifts are? The group thought about it.

“No,” one person said. “Why should it? So long as all are welcome, why should it matter what we eat?”

“I wouldn’t mind if we used Coke and Oreos,” one person was willing to admit.

I mean why not? In some ways, the church has made it so much harder than it needs to be to get close to God and to swallow down love. It couldn’t hurt to make the whole experience a bit tastier. Maybe more people would show up if we had Coke and Oreos on the menu. For that matter, we know there is no perfect table for everyone anyway. In our great efforts to make communion open and accessible to all, there will always be some who will struggle to get to the table. The bread might not be something we can eat; the distance might be too great; the crowd might be too many; our faith in believing we belong might be too wanting.

I was so moved a couple communions ago when the congregation was coming forward and Pam Gilson stepped up to get a piece of bread for herself and I realized we had forgotten to provide gluten-free bread, and Pam needs gluten-free bread. I said I was so sorry. I said there was enough for everyone, but there wasn’t. “It’s okay,” Pam told me, her hand on my shoulder, “I’ll still come back.”

Does it matter what products we use for communion? I believe it does. If for no other reason than that a package of Oreos costs \$3.99, a bag of Doritos, \$4.25, and not everyone can afford them. A bottle of Coke is cheap, but this is why children in third-world countries are forced to drink it as toddlers. Well, this and the fact that in such places it’s easier to get a bottle of Coke than it is to get clean drinking water.

“Blessed are you, O God of creation,” goes the most ancient of all Jewish prayers. “Who gives rain and makes the earth to grow.” And we say, blessed also is the farmer who plants the seed and harvests the wheat to make the bread, and the grapes to make the juice. And blessed is the delivery truck driver who brings the bread and juice to market. And blessed is the store worker who stocks the shelves to make such gifts available to us. And blessed are we who can reach into our pockets to pull forth what is needed to fill the table. But more blessed are we who know that this truly is a communion of the undeserving, a Eucharist of grace for those whose only fallback in the world is the love of God.

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This is the question Jesus is asking in our gospel lesson today. He is sitting at the table with the Pharisees, who are watching his every move to see what he's going to do next. For the Pharisees, the table is everything. From what goes on the table, to what goes on *at* the table, to whether you did or did not bother to wash your hands before coming to the table, to who sits at the table, and next to whom, the Pharisees use the table as a way to define who they are socially, religiously, and economically. It's not totally unlike the way we understand how what we do here—the words we speak, the bread we use—how it all sets us apart as being different, and maybe, maybe, better, or less better, than our Catholic or Methodist or Baptist or Jewish or non-denominational friends. Right? I've heard us say that before.

This is what the Pharisees are up to when they sit down at the table—they're ordering their world according to who, what, and when is important. The problem is, says Jesus, they've got the order all wrong. Noticing how each has tried to elbow their way into the place of honor, he says, "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might still come along. Then you'll get called out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this person over here.' Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left. Rather, when you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when your host comes they can say to you, 'Friend, move on up.' Now that will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I'm saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.

And if you're the host, next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out. Trust me, you'll be blessed for doing so. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned—by God."<sup>1</sup>

This is what the Pharisees don't get, and the reason they don't get it is because they themselves are not where they want to be. Their own world is not in order. Sure, socially,

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Message* translation

religiously, and economically they are at the top of their game, but geographically, everything is out of whack. They are living in 1st century Palestine. Egypt is to their south, modern day Turkey is to their north, the Dead Sea and the Negev Desert are right out their window. Rome, the most powerful of all their neighbors, is a hundred miles away. And yet, Rome isn't. In fact, if you're a Pharisee, Rome is sitting at your dining room table. For in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, Rome, with her mighty army, with her insatiable appetite for control, has moved in and taken over everything. She tells you where you can and cannot go in your own neighborhood. She takes the first of your crops each season and puts them on her own table. She raises your taxes and then sends the money back to Rome, giving you nothing in return.

This is the world the Pharisees are living in—a dog-eat-dog world. And they are not the top dog, and they know it, and for the moment they feel helpless to do anything about it. And so what do you do when you can't beat 'em? You join 'em. When in Rome...

Until along comes Jesus. Like the Pharisees, he likes a good table, and he believes in the power of the table to set the world right again. But he also sees what it's doing to the Pharisees, what it's doing to us, how its killing our souls—this fight to get the seat of honor, to make ourselves look like we belong, like we're best friends with the host, like we're worth more than crumbs. "Give up the fight," says Jesus, "give it up. For don't you know, at the table of God, crumbs is all there is. But thanks be to God, for the love of crumbs, everyone gets a seat of honor.