

February 3, 2019

Youth Sunday

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Making Room at the Table

John 4: 4-27
Luke 19: 1-10

Elizabeth's Message



As it became clear our theme for Youth Sunday was going to be centered around this idea of Making Room at the Table, a story came to mind. A story of radical hospitality extended between a Christian and a Hindu.

When I served as a chaplain at St. Joe's Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor Michigan, I was assigned a patient's request. This patient was in the labor delivery wing and just delivered her 4th still born after having already endured 6 miscarriages. One could see how important this request may be, except one detail, the patient and her family were Hindu, and we had no chaplains of her religion available. I thought...how could I be of any help to her or her family? I was only 24, never been pregnant or had a miscarriage, and a Christian.

As I walked through the threshold of the patient's delivery room, all preconceptions and fears subsided because of the overwhelming feeling of grief coming from the family. The room was dark, and family stood around the bed. I took a chair beside the mother.

We hear, mostly in TV shows or movies, of out of body experiences, or the physical presence of God in the form of an angel, but what you'll hear over the next 20 minutes, there was no mistake that God was truly present.

After speaking with the family for a few minutes, a nurse brought back the cleaned and wrapped body of the infant. The family had requested that he be brought back to pray over. And so I began a healing prayer, leaving time for the family to say their personal prayers, because I surely couldn't cover the prayer needs of the Hindu beliefs. As I prayed for the baby's soul claiming his name, Adi, to be blessed and cared for in his after life, voices broke out from different members of the family, in a language I did not understand, but yet knew what was being said. In that moment our religions had no differences, we welcomed each other into this space of prayer and healing. When I closed our prayer, the grandmother looked at me and asked if I would take part in a loss of life ritual. As she began, we each took turns sprinkling rice and droplets of water on the baby. Then with my heart feeling like it was ripping out of my chest, we passed the wrapped infant into the arms of those standing around and marked the child's forehead with a red powder. This experience changed my outlook on faith. The faith we have been taught was brought to life;

to love one another and above all put God in the forefront of our daily thoughts. This family, although not Christian, held the same beliefs. They invited me to witness that their pain and grief came second to their God's presence in the short life of this child. With urgency they knew that the first thing they must do was to bless this life by giving it away, and then God would take care of their grief.

I share this vivid and raw story with you all to demonstrate that God's radical hospitality comes in all shapes and sizes. We are agents in God's hospitality on earth, invited to the table; so who will you invite to the table?

Grace Marburger's Message

To me "making room at the table" means to be inclusive and hospitable. Making room for others who would not usually be included. As a student I see many who fail to be inclusive during the school day, especially during lunch. People sit alone all the time, and some are even picked on. God has called us as Christians to love and look out for everyone. Jesus says in Matthew 22, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it. Love your neighbor as you love yourself."* As Christians we must follow God in being hospitable to all people whether they are like us or not.

Jesus made room at the table for the Woman at the Well by simply welcoming her. Jesus spoke to her even though it was not the social custom among Jews to speak to a woman in public. He learned her story and taught her how to receive everlasting salvation.

The Woman at the Well was unwelcomed because she was a Samaritan woman. There was bitter hostility between Jews and Samaritans during Jesus' day. The woman said to Jesus, *"You are a Jew and I a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink of water?"* The reason for hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans goes back a long way. When the Assyrians took Samaria captive, they deported large numbers of the inhabitants and replaced them with people from all over their empire. These people brought their own gods with them, but they added the worship of the Lord to their other practices. In time their polytheism disappeared, and they worshiped the Lord alone. Their religion had its peculiarities. They acknowledged as sacred Scripture only Genesis through Deuteronomy. Their religion was also marked by a pronounced bitterness toward the Jews. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after being exiled in Babylon, the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild their temple, but the offer was refused. The Samaritans refused to worship at Jerusalem, preferring their own temple. When their temple was burned by the Jews, relations worsened. The Woman at the Well was also immoral. John 4, Verse 18 says, *"The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband."* She arrived at the well at the sixth hour which would have been noon. Most women came to the well in groups earlier or later in the day to avoid the heat. Perhaps she came at this time because public shame isolated her from the other women.

Personally I have never been in the position of the Woman at the Well, but I have included others many times. On Thursday of this week a girl probably in her sophomore year, came up to me at lunch and asked to sit with us. I was the first to say "Yes of course!" but my friends

followed right behind me saying yes. When she sat down, she told us that the friends she would normally sit with ditched her. We said she was welcome to sit with us anytime.

It's virtually impossible for all people to agree with each other but when I come to a disagreement, I pray for God's guidance. I pray that myself and the other person can follow a mutual path which will lead us closer to God and in the right direction. God has a plan for everyone, and I know that he will guide me through difficult times when it comes to others.

Reverend Bob Callaghan unpacked the symbolism of the parable of the lost sheep. In the gospel reading, the shepherd leaves his flock of 99 sheep to find the one that is lost. The 99 are left unattended; perhaps they don't need the shepherd's attention, as they are safe, secure and included. But the lost sheep needs the shepherd. This is the challenge. Our greatest effort should be in seeking out those who are excluded, not in making sure that the 99 on the inside are comfortable. Does this mean seeking the "lost sheep" so they return to services? Is it about making sure others think the way we do? Is it a warm liberal idea that means, "You are welcome, you come to us and we will accept you?" It is none of these. We are called to be with those on the margins, not so that we can pull them in so they become just like us, but so all of us are transformed by a new way of being together in an open and honest relationship with God.

Julianna Augustine's Message

With a show of hands, how many of you ate the same thing every day as a child? You might be wondering, "How does this relate to making room at the table?" Well, you're right. But in this example, the food represents people. As a child I had the staples like Kraft mac n cheese, and dinosaur chicken nuggets; that was all I knew. Similarly, as a child I had my parents and sister, maybe I had some close friends. But as I've gotten older, I've tried Pad Thai, sushi, and risotto. As I've gotten older, I've met people of different races, backgrounds, orientations, and even some who don't speak the same language. This is what welcoming people to the table means...it's expanding God's love to others without barriers or pretext. It means opening our minds and hearts to explore other cultures, people, and opinions.

This is what Jesus did with Zacchaeus. Jesus showed Zacchaeus that he was as worthy as anyone else. Even as an average man, Zacchaeus was worthy enough to share dinner with the Messiah. Furthermore, Jesus saw past the sinner filled by greed and into Zacchaeus' heart. Even with his job and title in society, Christ looked him in the eyes and invited him, without pretext or judgments. Put simply, Jesus treated Zacchaeus as his equal and showed He was happy to see him. Zacchaeus was not an interruption in the Messiah's schedule; Jesus always seeks those who seek Him. No matter who, whether it be Zacchaeus or another declared sinner, Christ will always have an open place at the table. Upon seeing Jesus' kindness and welcoming attitude, Zacchaeus' life was forever changed. He repented and was welcomed by Jesus to God's table and the Christian faith.

For Zacchaeus, Jesus asking to eat at his house was astonishing. This was not just because the Messiah just asked him to share dinner, but it was also amazing because Zacchaeus wasn't a popular man. As the head tax collector, he was already associated with greed and taking peoples' money. To make matters worse, Zacchaeus proved his label true by constantly cheating people

out of money. This was how he became so rich; Zacchaeus became rich from extorting his neighbors. On top of all this, Zacchaeus was a man who was a representative of the oppressive Roman Empire. The relationship between the Jews and the Roman Empire was shaky during this period in the Bible, so anyone representing them would surely be criticized. All in all, no one welcomed Zacchaeus because he was a sinner driven by greed. But despite all these differences, Jesus still embraced him with unconditional love.

Now, when I was planning this sermon two weeks ago, I was looking for stories where I "made room at the table." One story stuck in my mind. In the summer of 2017, I was one of three girls to go on the Cross Missions trip. When we got to the church in Charlotte, North Carolina, we quickly realized that our group was the smallest church group there. That was pretty intimidating. Luckily, we were all together in our group with a couple of other kids. We quickly got to know them, and by the end of the week, we were brothers and sisters. On the final night, there were no dry eyes in the room and on the van ride home. To this day, I have never had an experience like that, an experience where there are no limits of welcoming and love. They all welcomed us with open arms; they welcomed us to their table. Similarly, God has embraced everyone with open arms and unconditional love. We are his children; we are all equal in his eyes.

As Presbyterians we are all called to go and welcome others. As a congregation we are called to show God's love with our actions every day. There is no doubt we should be inclusive, but we need to embrace people with our hearts and our open minds. And in the words of Daphne Rose Kingma, "In the end, nothing we do or say in this lifetime will matter as much as the way we have loved one another." Amen