

COME SIT BY ME

Luke 17.7-10

World Communion, October 2, 2016

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Peace be with you. And also with you.

My colleague at University Baptist Church, Anne Hall, had a poster hung on her office door that read: “A modest proposal for peace: Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other.” That wouldn’t stop all the wars to be sure. And it’s a far cry from the great hope of “world communion.” But it might get us down the road toward what John Lennon imagined:

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion, too

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace...

Perhaps World Communion is an opportunity to imagine more than a “modest proposal” for peace. Perhaps it invites us to imagine, as Rachel Held Evans does, “building bigger banquet tables” where people, regardless of nation or race or religion, have a place at the table.

Let’s eat fruit in season [she says] and drink coffee that’s fairly traded so that Latin farmers can join us at the table with their heads held high. Let’s share the reputation of Jesus and dine with those the religious love to hate – gays and lesbians, divorcees, single moms, junkies, dreamers and doubters. Let’s squeeze in a little tighter to make enough room for people of all political persuasions, all religious backgrounds, all ethnicities and all denominations. Let’s eat a little less so that everyone has enough, and let’s linger a little longer so that everyone gets a chance to share what’s on their mind.

That sounds an awful lot like world communion to me.

And what I have noticed about being with Mona in those immigrant and refugee communities is that those folks want to feed you. They want to cook for you. Somehow they know that there is a kind of power in sharing a meal together.

Geoff McGhee sent article that got passed on to me a while ago from the Seattle Globalist about “Migrating Meals.” It’s a series of dinners hosted by immigrant and refugee-run restaurants here in Seattle where tough topics like identity and colonization, Islamophobia and gender are on the table along with the food from around the world. The person who wrote the article said that she was on a tight schedule but her meeting at a Kenyan restaurant was twice as long as she had planned because she found herself caught up in conversation “lingering over the last Kenyan samosa.”

“You want to talk about uniting in our common humanity?” she writes, “Well, food is one of the foundations of that.”

By the way, if this sounds like a good idea to you and you want go online to sign up, I have bad news for you. It’s already sold out. The good news is that there will be more. And that’s good news today because these “migrating meals” sound like world communion to me.

The lesson for today from Luke 17 is a story, I think, that tries to fire up our imaginations about what it takes to sit at a table with one another.

I am going to be reading the *Inclusive Bible* version of this story. It’s a version of the Bible put together by Roman Catholic priests who were convinced that if people were to feel included in worship, they needed to hear their own lives represented in the stories of scripture. So they have tried to update these stories in ways that are meant to break down social barriers and in what they understand to be “non-sexist” ways.

Luke 17.7-10

Jesus said, “If one of you had hired help plowing a field or herding sheep, and they came in from the fields, would you say to them, ‘Come and sit at my table?’ Wouldn’t you say instead, ‘Prepare my supper. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You can eat and drink afterward’? Would you be grateful to the workers who were just doing their job? It’s the same with you who hear me. When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, ‘We are simple workers. We have done no more than our duty.’” (the *Inclusive Bible*)

Now, in the interest of making this story more modern and to break down some of the barriers we might have in feeling a part of it, the *Inclusive Bible* imagines a conversation you might have with your “hired help” – rather than what the New Revised Standard version has translated as “your slave.”

Now that is an important change. Maybe they thought we wouldn’t relate to slavery anymore or that it would make us feel uncomfortable or that it just doesn’t exist in our modern world.

But it does. Slavery itself, and the effects of it, are still very much with us.

And maybe you noticed that, even in this updated version of the story, it sounds like we might treat “hired help” as if they were “slaves.” They come in from working all those long hours in the fields and rather than saying “come on, sit down, I’ll get you something to eat,” aren’t you are more likely to say: “Put on your apron and wait on me so I can eat and you can eat and drink afterward?”

In other words, we may have modernized the language but we are still likely – our economic system is likely – to treat “hired help” like slaves, especially if they are from immigrant communities.

And then, at the end of the story, it sounds like we are supposed to be like the “hired help” who are owed no gratitude because we are just doing our job. No thanks required: “We are simple workers.”

Now I have to say that “simple workers” is an improvement over the New Revised Standard version which says that “when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves.’”

Good for the priests of the *Inclusive Bible* to render this “simple workers” because the priests know their Bible and they know that Jesus just told this powerful story about the prodigal’s return home in Luke 15. That story should have cured us of this “worthless slave” mentality. “I am not worthy to be called a son,” the returning prodigal says, “let me be like one of your hired help.” But the father says: “No! Bring a robe and ring and let’s set the table for a feast because my son who was lost has found his way home again.”

Honestly, I’m not sure what idea this story is supposed to pass on to us. But imagining ourselves or other people as “worthless slaves” is not one of them.

According to this story, it might be surprising – it might be hard to imagine – but what we could say to the “hired help” or these “simple workers” is: “Come sit at my table.”

I am remembering this morning my lovely somewhat odd aunt Onalie, my mother’s older sister, who was delightful and generous and had this annoying habit of just breaking into song in some public place. I never wanted to go out to eat with her because she would routinely make us all stand up, hold hands, and sing the doxology. It was embarrassing.

And then my uncle died. And Onalie was lonely. So she started going to the same restaurant every day for lunch. She got to know the wait staff and they got to know her. Eventually the staff reserved a table for her and, when they had a break, she would say: “Come sit by me.”

When Onalie died, the news got around the restaurant and we met several of the wait staff at her funeral. They all talked about how wonderful she was and how kind she was and how she just loved to have them come sit at her table and talk. Onalie would say that these folks were not “hired help” or “simple workers.” These people were family.

Because sharing a table can do that to you.

Rachel Held Evans says that “Americans are good at feeding people; but dining with people is an entirely different matter” ...

Dining together, she says, means sitting next to one another and brushing arms, passing the bread and sharing the artichoke dip. It means double-dipping and spilling drinks, laughing together and crying together, exchanging stories, ideas, recipes and dreams.

And so we come to this table this morning not just as another reminder that there are hungry people and lonely people and people who think they are worthless who need to be fed some love and compassion and some real food.

This table is an invitation to “come sit by me” - to re-imagine the world as one great big banquet table where people are sitting together and sharing their food and their stories and themselves.

I can hear my aunt Onalie in that sing-songy voice this morning saying: “Honey, come on; come sit by me.”

And today, if *you* hear that voice, don’t waste your time being embarrassed or wondering whether you are worthy, let it melt your heart and come sit by me.

NOTES

Rachel Held Evans’ article “Bigger Banquet Tables” is part of a collection by young evangelical authors in *Letters to a Future Church* (IVP Books, 2012), pp.140-143. “Migrating Meals” by Sarah Stuteville is in the September 9, 2016 *Seattle Globalist*; see www.seattleglobalist.com/2016/09/09.