

CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: TABLES

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 24:13-35

The focal point of our scripture passage for today takes place at a table. This table happens to be a table at an inn where Jesus has a meal with two of his followers (although at the time, they don't realize who he is). And since our reading takes place at a table, I have set before you three different tables for you to consider.

The first table is a kitchen table. The kitchen table is where we take most of our meals. It's where the family gathers not just to eat but to do homework, read the mail, have snacks, pay bills, drink coffee. The kitchen table is often cluttered. It is the workbench of the home. It reflects the life in the home. It is at the kitchen table that we ask each other, "How was your day?" It's where we hear good news such as, "Mom, dad, I've met someone special." It's where we hear the not-so-good news like, "The report from my test came back today." The kitchen table is the heart of the home.

The second table we have is the dining table. This table is formal. It is here that we find the "good" china. The dining table is reserved for special meals and special guests. It is where we celebrate holidays and birthdays and anniversaries. The dining table isn't used as much as the kitchen table. It may be in its own room—a room that stays closed, a room that the children aren't allowed to play in. There is an air of mystery hanging over the dining table.

The third table is our communion table. This is not a table that we find in our homes. Rather we find it in God's house. It is set to remind us of the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night that Judas betrayed him. The communion table is the table of Jesus' last meal. The communion table is the symbol of our unity as Christians. The bread represents Jesus' body broken on the cross. Jesus is the *bread of life*. The wine (or grape juice) represents his blood. Jesus gave us these things to remind us of his sacrifice.

The communion table can be formal or informal. We can set it with silver or gold or simple ceramics. But no matter how we set it, it is always sacred.

As I said, our reading for today focuses on a table. This story tells of a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, on Easter morning some women who were followers of Jesus go to the tomb and find it empty. They report this fact to the disciples who do not believe them.

Luke then jumps to telling us of two men who are traveling away from Jerusalem. They are not among the twelve and we have not met them before. They appear to part of the wider group of Jesus' followers.

It is still the day of Jesus' resurrection. These two had heard the report of the women about the empty tomb and are now headed home. There is no reason to remain in Jerusalem. Jesus is dead. His corpse has been pilfered. The party is over. It's time to call it quits. One of the men is named Cleopas; we aren't given the name of the other.

These two men are traveling the road toward a village called Emmaus. This was not their home; it was just the first stop on their journey. The location of Emmaus has been lost to time. Scripture tells us it was *60 stadia* from Jerusalem (which would be about seven miles).

These two men are walking toward Emmaus, and they are deep in conversation when a third man approaches and inquires as to what they are discussing so intently. The man asking this question is Jesus, but the two don't realize it. As the gospel explains, *their eyes were kept from recognizing him*.

Cleopas responds to the man and says, *Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?* The man asks, *what things?* And Cleopas recites the events of the life of Jesus.

Jesus responds to the men saying, *Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?*

Jesus isn't being critical when he calls the men foolish. It's softer than that. He's just pointing out that they have missed the point. And then, as they walk along, Jesus offers an extended Bible study. He explains and interprets how the Messiah has been foretold throughout scripture.

When they reach Emmaus, Jesus walks ahead, but the others urge him to stay. At the inn, they gather at a table. Jesus takes the bread that is on the table. He *blessed and broke it, and gave it to them*. When he does this, the eyes of the two men are opened *and (finally) they recognized Jesus*. And then, Jesus vanishes.

Realizing what has taken place, the two remember that as Jesus was explaining the scriptures to them on the road, their *hearts burned*. Instead of staying the night at the inn, the two rush back to Jerusalem to locate the others and tell them what they've seen.

Every time I read this story, what I want to know is, Why don't the two recognize Jesus on the road? What is it that kept their eyes from seeing him? Maybe it is as simple as that they weren't expecting him. Afterall, they thought he was

dead. How could a dead man be walking with them? Jesus was the last person they would expect to meet.

But the real answer, I believe, is that they didn't recognize Jesus because their hearts weren't burning. They knew the Jesus story. That is obvious. When the man on the road asks what they are discussing, they are able to recite to him the details of Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet before God, mighty in Word and deed.

The two are able to recite this chain of events as easily as we recite the Apostles' Creed. They know about Jesus. If they were given a quiz, they would receive an A+. But despite all they know, they still can't recognize the risen Jesus standing before them. They can't recognize Jesus because they lack something. Remember, on the road, Jesus interpreted the scripture for them. Then, at the table, when he broke bread, it all came together, and their eyes were opened. Although they knew the story, it wasn't until Jesus spoke to them that their *hearts burned* within them. Their hearts burned with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And that is where the tables come in. When Jesus sat at the table with the two men and blessed the bread and broke it, they got it. They were able to see Jesus there with them at the table. They had been blind, but the scales on their eyes were gone.

And think of all the people that Jesus welcomed to the table with him. On one occasion, he was dining at the home of a man named Matthew, and we read that *many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him* (Mt 9:10-13). In another story, Jesus invites himself to the house of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. He no doubt ate with Zacchaeus even though Zacchaeus was widely despised by the people.

But tables aren't the only places that Jesus welcomes the broken. When a man with leprosy comes to him seeking healing, Jesus does the unimaginable and touches him. Touching a leper would make one unclean. Yet Jesus does so saying to the man, *I am willing*.

And then there was the woman caught in adultery. The crowd was waiting to throw rocks at her until she died. Jesus calmly states that the one without sin was certainly free to pitch the first rock.

It is clear that Jesus welcomed the lost and the broken to his table. And when there was no table, he created one and fed thousands from almost nothing.

In the Lord's Supper, our Christ is with us in the bread and the cup. And at this table he calls all of us to him, to see him. The table is the ultimate expression of Jesus' ministry. It is what all Christians should seek to emulate. Every table should be the table where all are welcomed. Imagine if every table was open to every person. Not just here in church, but in our homes as well.

It would be easier at the kitchen table. That is normally our home's "public" space. But what about the dining table—our inner sanctum, our personal space? Do we let just anyone sit there? Isn't that reserved for special guests and occasions? Do we let anyone eat off the good china? But imagine how the world would be different if we simply made our tables a place of sanctuary. It just might start to resemble God's kingdom.

Communion is about remembering—remembering Jesus' sacrifice for us. At the very least, As Christians, we should make each table a place of remembering, a place that is holy—the kitchen table, the cafeteria table, the restaurant table, the banquet table—every table should be God's table. When we pray and eat and drink, remember, and Christ is with us.