

SEEING IS BELIEVING - TABLE
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 26:14-30
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
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'Maundy Thursday'

My very first interview for a position with a church,
took place at a table.

Before heading over to the actual church building
where a search committee would interview me
for the position of associate minister,
the Senior Minister and his wife,
Wally and Audrey,
invited Wendy and I and our then six month old daughter
to dinner with them at their house.

Having us for dinner was very gracious of them.

They were in no way obliged to have us for dinner.

It wasn't part of the application process.

I kind of figured

they were kindly trying to give us a chance to catch our breath
and regroup after a long drive, before a long interview.

And they were doing that. Genuinely so.

But that dinner was also my first interview.

although I had no idea it was taking place.

For you see, Wally and Audrey were of the opinion,

that what they saw around the table would show them

most of what they needed to know.

Manners, topics of conversation, and just general behaviour

were signals and cues for them

of what it would ultimately be like to work with the individual.

Wally and Audrey only revealed their strategy to Wendy and me

a number of months after we received and accepted the call

to serve with them and the congregation.

I was both baffled and intrigued.

The dinner was lovely, but it didn't seem that unusual to me.

I asked, 'What kind of things did you see in us?'

They said things like,

“Offering to help in the kitchen beforehand,

helping to clear the table,
showing interest in both of them as a couple
and as individuals.

My ongoing part in caring for our then infant daughter,
Heading off to change a diaper
so Wendy could eat.”

To which I said in my head,

‘Well thank you Mom for teaching me basic manners!’

But I was still puzzled.

I didn’t see anything exceptional going on in any of those behaviours.

So I asked, ‘How could that have possibly been helpful

to you in making a decision about bringing me on staff?’

They contrasted the behaviour with another candidate
who had been invited for dinner with his family.

They said he spent the meal ‘selling himself’,

highlighting his experience, his studies.

He spoke mostly to Wally and bypassed Audrey.

And to Audrey’s great chagrin,

the candidate didn't help his wife with their child in any way.

Audrey has always been the type of person

who would just call it.

'Well, you know how that's going to work out Wally!'

You learn a lot about people at the table.

Things you might not get to see in an interview.

It is around the table that you will often get a glimpse of the heart,

the priorities, the manners, the values and the issues

of those joined in the meal.

Think about your own family meals,

in many ways it pretty much tells the story, doesn't it?

Jesus spent a lot of time at tables.

It is no accident or coincidence that the central piece of furniture in our

sanctuary is a table, the Lord's Table.

At the table, the nature of the souls present can be revealed.

Watching where Jesus went for dinner,

and who he had dinner with,

made the Pharisees and teachers of the law
those who were insiders in the life of faith,
it made them cranky.

They muttered.

Muttered is such a great word.

It's right up there with grumble, pouted and grouched.

These religious insiders showed their souls at the table.

They were souls of entitlement, ownership and seniority.

They had muttering souls.

When Jesus' went to Zacchaeus' house, there was more muttering.

"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

Muttering, entitlement, ownership, seniority.

The table revealed anything but graciousness.

So Jesus taught table manners.

When he was invited to yet another table,

this time at a prominent Pharisee's house,

The Bible says they were watching Jesus carefully.

But Jesus was watching them too.

Watching their table manners.

Watching the guests pick places of honour for themselves.

Watching souls desperate to be first.

Jesus said to them,

‘when you are invited, take the lowest place,

everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,

he who humbles himself will be exalted.’

Jesus then told his host,

‘When you have a luncheon or dinner,

don’t invite your friends, your relatives or your rich neighbours.

If you do, they may invite you back,

and you will be repaid.

When you give a banquet, invite the poor,

the crippled, the blind, the lame and you will be blessed.’

Jesus taught table manners to souls that were primarily concerned with

“What’s in it for me?

What will I get out of it?

Will I be properly recognized?

Will the favour to be returned, and my gift reciprocated?

Their souls were revealed at the table.

Jesus even told stories about being at tables.

He told the story about the man who prepared a great banquet,
and invited many guests.

When all was ready he sent out notice to come to the table.

‘Come, everything is now ready.’

What he got back, were excuses.

I’ve just bought a field, I have to go check it out.

I’ve just bought five yoke of oxen,

I have to go close the deal.

I just got married. Please excuse me.

The host was furious.

Go bring in the down and out; the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame.

There was still room.

The host sent the servant out to the roads and country lanes.

He wanted his house full,

and those invited who chose not to come, would be left out.

You learn a lot about souls at the table.

This host was desperate to have his table filled.

Jesus told another story about a table, a party really.

In that story a son who was lost came home.

The Father threw a party.

Invited everyone in to his table.

Standing outside was the older brother.

He was angry.

He refused to go in.

Even when the Father came out and pleaded with him,

all the elder son could say was,

'I have slaved for you,

yet I never even got a young goat

so I could celebrate with my friends.'

I slaved.

I'm not coming in.

An invitation to the table revealed that this soul saw himself as only a slave.

Our theme for this Easter series has been seeing is believing.

Using the metaphor of the iceberg,

we've been striving to point out

that in the Christian faith,

some of what you see, has so much more under the surface.

These next services, have under the surface,

almost the entirety of our faith.

A table, a cross and a tomb.

If you can see these,

and see below the surface of these,

your faith will have depth so great,

it will never run dry.

And tonight, at the table,

you get to see the soul of our Lord revealed.

You get to see Jesus with depth.

People like to get all up and in my face about

the God of the Old Testament
the one whom they have turned into a caricature
of violence and anger.
They've likely done it to you too at some point.

I always want them to bring them to this table.
You learn a lot about souls around the table.
This table tells the story.

At the last supper,
at the table with his disciples,
Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them,
saying, 'This is my body given for you.'
Jesus, who said I am the bread of life, gave himself to them.

Then Jesus took the cup saying,
'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.
It is poured out for you, for many,
for the forgiveness of sins.'
Jesus who said

the one who believes in me will never be thirsty,
gave his blood, his life.

You learn a lot about souls at the table.

And at this table,

We see that Jesus in the one who was willing

to put his whole life on the table.

Who was willing to give his whole life,

to feed, sustain, nourish, and bring life to others.

Never mind the caricature people come up with of an Old Testament God,

what does a person do with this God before us tonight?

This God who washes feet of those at the table before the meal.

This God who said I am the bread of life.

And then at the table says,

this is my body broken for you.

What does a person do with this God,

who shed his own blood for someone else's forgiveness?

When you are shown the table,

and see this God,

this God who does all of this
knowing one will betray him
and that the rest will abandon him,
this God who will give of himself to these anyway,
well then, what do you do with this God?

Do you ignore the invitation because you have other stuff to do?

Do you refuse to come to the table?

Do you mutter about who else is at the table?

Do you make excuses about why you can't be there?

When I show people the table,

it becomes pretty clear, pretty quickly

that it is much easier to dismiss and reject

some angry God of one's own making,

than to have to consider

a God who invites you to his table and washes your feet

and so have to deal with the gracious love

of a God willing to give his own life

so you can live.

You learn a lot about souls at the table.

The table shows the soul.

Jesus' actions at table and in the garden remind me of a scene in the movie
Babette's Feast.

The movie is so powerful in its message
it has become a touchpoint for me.
I am guilty of referring to it often.

Babette, having fled as a refuge from France,
was taken in by two Danish spinster sisters,
to be their maid and cook.

They told her she could only make them
boiled cod and boiled bread with beer.

They have no idea that Babette is actually a famous French chef.

After a number of years of living with the sisters

Babette unexpectedly wins a lottery from back in France.

She asks the sisters if she can prepare a true feast for them.

They agree.

It is a glorious meal,

so glorious, that those around the table barely have words

to describe it.

They don't realize that Babette has spent every dime
of her lottery winnings on the meal.

She gave up everything of her own,
the possibilities for her own future,
and the potential to get back to her own life.

I love the story and refer to it repeatedly because it gives us such a clear
understanding of what we are seeing tonight.

It is a picture of Philippians 2

where Paul teaches

have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God

something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

emptying himself of everything except service,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

There in the kitchen,
following the meal,
you see Babette, sitting in the corner,
dishevelled, exhausted, spent.

She gave the sisters everything she had to give.

I see Jesus in the garden after being at the table,
after the Passover meal with the disciples
where he knows he is giving everything he has to give,
dishevelled, exhausted, spent,
anticipating his sacrifice,
knowing he has nothing more left to give,
because he is giving his body,
his blood,
his very life,

to them, and to many for the forgiveness of sins.

I can show you the place where you see the depths of God's soul.

It is this table that shows you.

This is the God we serve.

This is the table to which we are invited.

The God we serve doesn't wait for you to get it together
to justify loving you.

The God we serve loves us when we were,
and are and and will be unloveable.

Jesus said, I am among you as one who serves.

Jesus said, I have come that you might have life and have it to the full.

Jesus took the bread and said,

This is my body broken for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.

Jesus said, This cup is the new covenant in my blood,
poured out for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.

I am among you as one who serves.

You learn a lot about souls at the table.

The host has revealed the depths of his soul.

The Lord God has laid it all on the table, for you.

Your table manners will reveal your own soul.

You can come to the table muttering,

with a sense of entitlement, ownership, seniority.

You can come to the table hoping to get something out of it,

some sort of recognition or place of honour,

some sort of peace, or resolution, or hope.

Or you can come to the table,

with simple, overwhelming gratitude

for a God who

despite our betrayals, denials and abandonments

invites us, welcomes us,

serves us, and gives everything of himself for us,

because he loves us.

Seeing is believing and
this table shows you what you need to see and believe.

Amen.