

Psalm 78:1-8, 11-20 ~ Luke 24:28-35

*Table Grace*

November 18, 2018 ~ Thanksgiving Sunday

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### **Introduction to Text**

“Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. “(Luke 24:13-16) That’s how this story begins. And we are familiar with how it ends, but let us not rush there too quickly. These two, Cleopas and his friend, were sad, very sad. Luke tells us they even looked sad. They were likely feeling confused and shrouded in a fog of spiritual darkness as they walked quickly away from Jerusalem. They didn’t know what else to do with their grief and confusion over Jesus’ ghastly crucifixion and now three days later, the disappearance of his body. So they started walking. And as they walked, this stranger has taken up with them, stride for stride. This stranger who seems to know what the scriptures told about the Messiah, but knows absolutely nothing about what just happened. Could this day get any stranger?

### **Sermon**

“Who will say grace for us today?” I have a hunch that this Thursday as many as one person per pew might be the one who is called upon to offer a table blessing before everyone begins digging into steaming plates of turkey smothered in gravy and all those other delightful dishes that make it Thanksgiving for us. I can guarantee you that the question, “Who will say grace?” is sure to silence the rowdiest crowd. It may be the one quiet moment between the clanging of dishes in the kitchen; and the Bears and Lions football on the T.V., and the kids yipping and hollering over the new video game, Fallout76, in another room. If you go out to a restaurant to enjoy the delights of someone else cooking and cleaning up your Thanksgiving feast, the question of, “Who will say grace?” will certainly produce the same kind of silence, but in a more public setting.

Even if you’re not in the habit of offering a prayer before a meal, since it is Thanksgiving this holiday calls out for a table blessing. If you’re ever going to say a prayer before a meal, this is the day it will happen. But *nbo* will say it? Some of us have prayers printed on a card in a convenient drawer to pull out in the panic moment. We Presbyterians like to read prayers. Others may have one of the classics memorized, “God is great and God is good,” and of course those of us who are regarded as “professional prayers” know we always need to be at the ready.

The next thing I’m going to say may surprise you. As big an advocate as I am for the practice of pausing to take a breath and give thanks (whether silent or aloud) before any meal, it is actually what happens *after* the blessing that matters even more. As Brother David Steindl-Rast, Benedictine spiritual writer has put it, “What is the real prayer, the grace we say at the table, or the meal that follows it?”<sup>1</sup> Yes, there is something sacred about sitting at a table and breaking bread together.

Jesus knew it. He chose the moment when he was at the table with his twelve disciples, during his last supper on earth, to say to them, “This is my body, broken for you.

Take. Eat.” The table is lodged front and center in our theology and visually in our sanctuary: It teleports us to the very taproot of our soul connection with God and one another. Let’s call it “the power of the Table.” Communion happens there.

In today’s gospel lesson, we see it happen with two peripheral disciples at his “first supper” as the Risen Christ. They had no idea who he was when they started the meal. Even though they had spent over two hours walking seven miles together. He was strangely eloquent, yet uninformed about recent events. It was not until they were at the table together, when “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” Then they started to realize who and what had just been going on that whole afternoon. As they were eating together, at Table.

The Table is a primary place where we learn and practice grace. Yes, capital “G,” divine Grace. This mystical healing occurs not only at the Sacrament of Holy Communion, but can happen whenever we break bread...or nachos... or cheese curds, together. Whenever we simply affirm the presence of God by paying attention and listening to one another without judging or correcting. Especially when we bring to the Table *whatever* is on our hearts, the truth of what is troubling us. Yes, our brokenness. Truth telling. Holy listening. I think this is what Paul meant in his call to, “pray without ceasing,” in 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

The simple act of gathering around a table to eat a meal can become a gateway to so much more than shoving food in our faces. We may not realize how transformative conversation around the table can be. A study was conducted on National Merit Scholars, to see if a common denominator could be found between those who won this highly competitive scholarship. They did find one. Surprisingly, it didn’t have to do with family structure, or geography or income bracket. The one factor that all these successful young student scholars shared had to do with a table. They ate dinner with their families around a table on a frequent basis.

In an author interview with Melodie Davis, syndicated columnist and author of the book *Whatever Happened to Dinner?*, she explained why eating together as a family makes really matters: “It creates a routine and regular way to connect with children and parents, to check in, share highlights of the day and express love, concern and faith... By eating together, children learn the art of conversation. By letting others talk, by listening, they learn to respect others’ opinions, even when they don’t agree with them. They also learn about hospitality as they invite friends or other families. It can also help them develop good manners.”

As we lament the rise of rudeness, disrespect, and intolerance of people with whom we disagree, I wonder if this rise can be traced in part, to the lack of what I will call “sacred table time” in our lives as a culture. In Alan Bloom’s book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, he notes that one reason for the religious illiteracy so rampant in America is that families no longer eat together. Lessons about life, used to be shared around the campfire tables of ancient cultures, then around the dinner table for centuries, but how does that happen when people no longer eat together? How do we teach children, the next generation, about the glorious deeds of the Lord, as the Psalmist put it? And how we will learn of the kingdom of God, if we don’t listen to our children?

As theologian Martin Mary asked, in response to Bloom's book, "Who discusses Jesus or virtue or deep things at drive-throughs?" Here's the thing: The meal can be as simple as a toasted cheese sandwich or microwaved soup. Nor does the meal need to take a long time. Even a quick, but focused twenty-minute mealtime conversation together around a table—free of electronic devices—if done consistently over time can become a formative spiritual practice for everyone involved.

Looking back over the centuries and millennia we are reminded that the table has been a powerful image throughout scripture and across multiple cultures. The table, literally and metaphorically signals God's presence, God's provision. Around that table we can also feel the company of angels, saints, and loved ones that spans from earth to heaven. In Psalm 78, the psalmist recalls the Exodus, when the Israelites lost their nerve and doubted God's ability to provide for them in this desolate, desperate circumstance, writing: "They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God set a table in the wilderness?'" (Psalm 78.19) The is, "Yes." As the subsequent verses recount, "he rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Mortals ate of the bread of angels; he sent them food in abundance. (v.24-25)

If you are feeling out in the wilderness today because of a sudden, unwelcome change in your life or in the life of someone you love; if some bad even terrible news, is tying your stomach in knots, making it difficult to sit still and listen right now, hear this Good news from God for you this day: God can set a table in your wilderness. If you are weary, beaten down from fighting enemies within or around you, remember the promise in Psalm 23, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." God knows we have enemies. The question is, how we are able to deal with them because of God's presence, God's Table of Grace, however faint, however delayed, burning within us.

The idea of the divine table of grace extends beyond our Judeo-Christian tradition. We have a similar testimony to the power of the table in a beautiful poem written by one of my favorite poets, Joy Harjo, who belongs to the Muscogee Nation. The poem is titled "Perhaps The World Ends Here," and I want to bring her voice into our midst today as we prepare to celebrate our national Thanksgiving Holiday and the history from which it comes. Let us listen to this truth from Joy Harjo, as descendent of one of the first peoples of our land. Here it is:

*The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.*

*The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.*

*We chase chicken or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.*

*It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.*

*At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.*

*Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.*

*This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.*

*Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.*

*We have given birth at this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.*

*At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.*

*Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.<sup>ii</sup>*

Yes: The table is the place where the world, our worlds, can end and begin again. The table is the place where we can practice the grace God has already won for us. Christ died. And Christ has risen. And there were three days in between. Whatever fears and hopes, whatever confusion and clarity, we are holding in our hearts, at the table we can realize again, that we are not alone. Jesus, whether we realize it or not, is with us. Jesus is for us. And thanks to Christ, your spirit can find its healing path. It may surprise you. At this Table, the soul of our struggling nation can face dark truths, and take the slow path toward greater and new understanding together. God is saving a place for you at this table no matter where you are or where you've been or what you are going through right now.

We all have a chance this Thursday, or whenever you have your Thanksgiving meal, to let that Table be a place where you practice grace. A time where you try to “pray without ceasing” by doing some Holy Listening: Notice who is sitting next you and across from you. Seek out the children and young people: hear what they have to say. Risk sharing a deep truth that you have been guarding too long. Choose to sit next to the person you would normally avoid. Yes, even the one who voted the opposite of you in our recent election. When you are at the Table, look around at the faces and open your heart to the *least* likely sources of grace and truth for you. You might be surprised by what you hear. One person will probably lead the blessing prayer at your table on Thursday. It might be you. I challenge *all* of us to tap into the power of the table, for this is the place where we can practice and experience grace. This is a place where the world ends; and where it can begin to get better. Amen. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness*, (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984) 58.

<sup>iii</sup> Joy Harjo, *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems*, (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), 123-124.