

April 15, 2018

Matthew 14:15-21

There are some themes that are going to weave back and forth through our thinking today.

1. One has to do with our personal tendency to judge those we disagree with rather than treat them with love.
2. One has to do with the church's history to judge rather than welcome people.
3. One has to do with the need for us to be open and honest ourselves so we trust we are welcome - which makes it possible for others to feel like they can be open and honest and welcome with us.

We begin with scripture. Hear these words from the book of Matthew:

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Rob Bell has taught us that asking the "how did this happen?" question may not be the most useful question. A better question is "why?" and "why is it enduring?" or "why does this still speak to us today?"

And one of the answers to the why question for this feeding of thousands is Jesus was setting a big table. He was feeding everyone.

Part of the reason this message is so important still is because of the division we experience in society now. We wonder: can the table really be expanded so everyone has a place? We know that in a crowd the size that Jesus fed – there were all kinds. There were people who hated each other, who cheated each other, who called each other names, who would not have been caught dead sitting next to each other in temple.

In his book: *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*, John Pavlovitz asks this question about whether we really can sit at a Jesus size table. (I read this book last week and am shamelessly borrowing from it today.) In his introduction to the book he says his book isn't about right dogma, or which faith tradition, or political party, is right. It's about humanity, about the one flawed family we belong to and the singular, odd, staggeringly beautiful story we all share. And it's about jettisoning everything in and around us that would shrink our tables.

He begins by talking about how as he grew up he had two stories. One was about how much his family loved him. The other was about how much God loved him – although God didn't love everyone. There were people out there who needed to do some serious work before God could love them.

Maybe you grew up with those stories too. God is God of “decent” people. People who go to church.

The problem is when our tables are too small, so is our understanding of those who aren't sitting at it. And sometimes it takes meeting “other” people to grow our table.

When you think about it – the table Jesus set was not in a temple. It was in the world. Jesus viewed the whole world as his “temple”. Pavlovitz reminds us Jesus traveled along streets, through the fields and homes of Palestine, reminding people of the staggering glory that was beneath their feet and around their tables. He called attention to the kingdom of heaven that was in their midst. The whole world is spiritual – a place of creativity and collaboration and discovery and community.

If we think of the church as religious and the world as not, then it's much easier to divide. Instead of people being a stunning mosaic of unique pieces – there are two kinds of people: those that belong and those that don't.

I've talked before about how one of the problems the church has today is the way it is seen as being judgmental of those outside the church. A world view that divides people into good and bad is the reason for that. Today we have arrived at a point in history when those outside the church have the same view of church people the church has had of them. Many look on church people as being judgmental and divisive and not very nice.

Jesus life and ministry was about widening the community. He didn't invite inferior people to receive charity and get fixed. He welcomed guests to a dinner table where broken people - break – bread - together.

One of the clarifying moments in Pavlovitz's life was when his brother told the family he was gay – something that wasn't acceptable in the church they were raised in. The family was able to move past a tradition of judgment and just love their son and brother. Pavlovitz said part of what he had come to realize is that, "people aren't gay based on the approval you give or withhold. Your acceptance doesn't give people permission to be gay. It simply allows them to be fully authentic in your presence. And to feel loved as they are. He also invites us to think about the possibility that if we don't know anyone who is gay, it may be because we haven't created an environment where people feel safe being their real selves with us.

Then he invites us to think about the possibility that we don't have to share someone's experience to respect their road. We don't have to demand that they become something else to be loved by God or us. Real love just is. There aren't litmus tests that people have to pass in order for us to act with love towards them.

But litmus tests are easy for us to impose. Each of us can probably name someone we would find difficult to welcome to the table. The person who hurt our children, who jokes about rape, who says racist things, who stole from us... who has caused real hurt and harm.

It is interesting because one of the challenges of church is that we are okay with small sins, but not so okay with bigger sins. So we sit next to each other and think I can fess up to things like being impatient, but if I tell anyone the things that I said to my son last week they will think I'm terrible. So we tend not to be real with each other. And if we can't be real with each other, how are people who might not feel like they belong ever going to feel welcome at the table?

If the most God-honoring and Jesus-reflecting act is to err on the side of loving people, you take people as they are. The table expands, relationship can happen, and people start to realize they don't have to be perfect to be loved. They just have to be who they are. Jesus allowed people to see their worth in the midst of their flaws. He loved them first.

This is what can happen around family tables. People know each other's flaws, but they sit together and eat together. In the midst of the mundane, they love the broken people they break bread with. This is what Jesus does at the Last Supper too. He asks his friends to remember him when they break bread. To notice the holy things that happen in the midst of every day meals. To be aware of the divine.

Family tables often expand. You add extra seats to welcome the partners of your children, and to welcome their children. We build bigger tables as a sign of acceptance.

In Jesus' day, sharing a meal with someone was a sign of respect – of willingness to be associated publicly with them. This is one of the reasons Jesus was criticized. Because of who he was willing to sit at table with. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating with outcasts, and though we don't see it in the text, I'd be willing to bet a million dollars that the outcasts criticized Jesus for eating with the Pharisees. When the value of another person was disregarded, Jesus acted with welcome.

The story we read today is told in all four of the gospels. Not many stories are told four times, but this one is. Jesus is teaching in a remote spot and the place is packed. It's getting late and people are getting hungry. Jesus feeds them all.

People have spent centuries trying to explain how this happened. But that is not the most important question, nor is it one we can answer. But when we ask who

is fed and why they are fed, we see God's heart for hungry people. We see the tremendous challenge of expanding the table. The miracle isn't how people were fed. It's that every single person was valued.

Not a single person there had to do anything before they were fed. They didn't have to respond to an altar call. They didn't have to confess. They didn't have to proclaim they were going to change their lives, they didn't have to swear they hadn't told a lie that day. They didn't have to earn a seat at the table. They were just hungry, and Jesus loved them.

Their presence wasn't just tolerated. But they were fully welcomed. And this is worth thinking about. People know when they are being tolerated, and when they are genuinely received. Pavlovitz suggests that half-hearted co-existence isn't really what we aspire to. Jesus calls us to act with love towards one another, not to tolerate one another. At the Last Supper, Jesus even serves Judas, washing his feet and feeding him.

He forces us to struggle with the idea that we are called to sit at table with those we are offended by, angered by, those we fundamentally disagree with, those we are least inclined to welcome. This kind of lavish acceptance is something people crave, but it is hard to find.

We all have people we don't want to sit at table with. We don't want to suggest that we value them or what they stand for. This is what Jesus did. He made room for those who weren't included yet, those who weren't welcome yet. And it shouldn't hurt those who are already at the table to make room for more. But we don't want to.

Jesus' hospitality forces us to recognize how small our tables are. Most of us sit at table with people who are like us. And we carefully guard ourselves and don't admit to our genuine feelings because we are afraid we'll lose our place at the table.

This is not to suggest that it is easy to be genuine and authentic with each other. It's been said that it's a bloody battle in the trenches to bear with people who are unbearable and love people who are unlovable. Yet our invitation is to look for the treasure within the other person, to be aware there is a facet of divinity within.

Pavlovitz talks of becoming a fan of Prince. He was a hard rocker and thought of Prince fans as kind of freaky. But as he attended his first Prince concert he was realizing how Prince transcended a variety of musical genres and brought together an incredibly diverse group of people under one tent. He says the dance floor was big enough for everybody, and when you were at a Prince show you belonged. You were the right color, the right religion, the right shape, the right you. You felt at home in your own skin and deeply connected to those around you. He reminds us this is what the church aspires to. Being a place where you fell right at home in your own skin and deeply connected to those around you.

So how do we feel deeply connected to those who are so different from us? Perhaps one thing we can do is dig deeper and try to understand the fears and concerns of those who we fundamentally disagree with. And perhaps – and this is a big one - we give up our agenda – which is usually to change them, to fix them, to convert them. If instead of tolerating them or insisting on a litmus test, maybe we just reflect Christ and be true to ourselves, and trust that is enough.

When we treasure people as they are we become less manipulative. We become better listeners. We give up our job as morality police. We set a table of second chances, a table of grace, where you can't lose your place.

If our primary goal was to walk alongside of people reflecting Jesus, not needing them to see what we see or believe what we believe, just to encounter Jesus in us, it might change everything.

One of the most challenging things Pavlovitz says is that our theology is overrated. I have to admit I didn't really like that. But it might be true. Theology is important, but it is easy for it to become a litmus test where what people believe is more important than who they are. It's not that standards don't exist. It's that standards can obscure the person in front of us and the journey they have lived that has led them to this point.

The idea isn't to abandon our convictions. It's just not to demand that another person share them in order to be in deep, meaningful fellowship with you. If someone must agree with us to be our friend, **we** are creating distance and deepening division, feeding an us and them atmosphere, and feeding our self-righteousness.

An intimate meal with someone we disagree with, however, can destroy distance. The only way the table can expand is when we can do the difficult work of treating those we disagree with as people of value. We can have deep convictions, **and** not have to treat those who we disagree with as horrible.

The name Christian is no longer synonymous with Jesus, who walked alongside everyone, and set a table bigger and more expansive than anything previously imagined. Today, people hear the word Christian and they think of bigots, and people who discriminate and people who judge.

Real love is contagious. It doesn't need to force others into a narrow mold, rather it needs to love as Jesus loved.