

The Table of Love

September 10, 2017

Matthew 18:18-20 Romans 13:8-10

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Sunday is the start of the fall schedule, a return to the programming and activities that create the hum of the church which falls silent during the summer months. Actually we have not been that silent during the summer. What better time than this home again Sunday to preach that each and every time we come together, whether it's two, twenty-two, or two-hundred-and-two, Jesus is here. The promise of Jesus' presence in our gatherings, even when it's just a few of us, makes what we do *more* than what we do. There is great comfort in believing Jesus promise, "I am there among you."

Jesus' words in Matthew are every bit the truth of Immanuel we need to hear. And we need to hear these words often. In the United States, for the victims of Hurricane Harvey and Irma and around the world these words simply must be repeated, over and over again, as the funerals begin for those lost to the storm; as they continue the clean-up; as they look at months of working toward restoring the lives they once had. As we wait to hear from those we know and love regarding their well-being and those in situations when the only thing left to say, is "Jesus is here among us."

Sometimes, all that is necessary to be church, to do church, is to call upon Matthew 18:20 "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*" and take Jesus at his word.

This week I had the pleasure of sitting at a variety of tables with others I was amazed at the fellowship found while dining with others. I began my week at a bed and breakfast with friends who were part of our lives when our sons were in high school. As I walked in that dining room, music was playing softly and the tables were set much like our table here today. I could smell the fragrance of coffee and fresh baked muffins right out of the oven. The inn keeper Debbie welcomed me and told me to find a spot and settle in. She delivered our breakfast and tidied up after a few others as they finished theirs. We asked God's presence to be with us at this meal and then Debbie returned to check on us. After eating most of our meal she invited us to another cup of coffee and conversation. No telephones or newspapers just conversation at the table face to face. Jesus was found in the love shared there.

Thursday while sitting at the table with fellow United Methodist Women Jesus was found. Jolaine Houghton and I entered late as we finished with the duties of the mum sale. We were a bit tattered and dirty from a morning of shuffling mums from rake to ground, from ground to cars and also a few cars to homes. Yet, when we entered the room, a place was set for us and conversation was robust and stories of a season past were shared as well as new adventures waiting to be had. Jesus was found in the love shared there. What a joy to be in the midst of this.

Yet again, as Peter and I sat in a hotel breakfast room preparing to share in the wedding celebration of a former youth from a former congregation and his new bride, we sat a table with a couple who were there to share in a wedding but had left their family in Flagler Beach, Florida.

They shared the joy of being present for the wedding, yet the guilt they bore as mother, father and sister remained in Florida seeking shelter from Hurricane Irma in a town hopefully beyond the brutal reach of Irma. It was at the table where concerns were shared and Jesus was found.

As Pastor Beckie shared with us last week, dinner table conversation is a lost art. But when we come to the table fully present, Jesus shows up. Sometimes Jesus showing up is not always good news, at least for some. The promise of Jesus' presence, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," is comfort only insofar as you are comfortable with Jesus being that close. And I suspect that some of us, if we are honest, don't always want Jesus to be so near.

It appears that a lot of what happens in the church goes on without thinking about Jesus' words at all -- either intentionally ignoring them or choosing ambivalence. We assume them rather than rely on them. We take them for granted rather than ask ourselves, what difference does it make that Jesus is in the midst of everything we do as a community of faith? Everything we talk about? Every decision we make? Maybe our mantra should not just be, "What Would Jesus Do?" but, "What Would Jesus Hear?" "What Would Jesus Think?"

These days, there is ample evidence to suggest that many congregations and church committees carry on with business as if Jesus weren't in the room. Either they've forgotten, *Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there among them*, or prefer not to listen to Jesus this time around. Because if we really thought that Jesus was telling the truth, that Jesus overhears our discussions and decisions, that Jesus is sitting at the table as statements are drafted that call for condemnation, perhaps, just for a moment, there would be a minute of pause, a hint of hesitation. Perhaps we would think twice and ask ourselves whether or not we actually believe Jesus. It seems that these days a good number of things said about God assume God can't hear what is being said about God; that God is not in the room.

Immanuel is not always the God we want -- this God who insists on staying close, persists in being in the middle of what we do and say, especially when it comes to those things we do and say in God's name. There are many ways we can imagine who God is, but when *who* God is ends up also being *where* God is, well, that's theology best left in our theology books, gathering dust in our libraries. Because a God whose primary identity is that God is? Well, that's a God we won't be able to pin down and control. Immanuel is often far more difficult to confess than we are willing to admit. No wonder Jesus will then have to make this promise again, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, gives us some guidance on how to live in love, in Jesus presence. Agape, the word Paul uses to describe what God intends that we embody, moves us to grow well beyond the survival instincts that we often refer to as "only human." The human being, created in the image of God, is intended for life in the same love we witness in the life a teachings of Jesus. Agape love is talking about love not as a feeling or sentimental romance, but as an action. Love is what we owe our neighbors. Love is the fulfillment of the law. Love is not doing things in the dark that we don't want others to see, but rather putting on the honor of light and living honorably as in the day. Love is coming to the table knowing that Jesus is present with us.

Given our human struggles with human nature, it helps to recall the commandments that spell out what love is not: It does not live in our willingness to take life, livelihood or healthy life circumstances from another. Love does not live by holding another person in debt. Love does not live when we break the covenants of committed relationship. Love does not live in us when we are consumed possessions by the desire for others' possessions or to acquire more through dishonesty and violence. Love for self and for neighbor requires an awareness of our inner motives and drives. Love vigilantly prevents the thought or desire for what is wrong from becoming harmful action. When we live in love, we first do no harm to ourselves or to others.

One of my favorite movie characters makes a long journey into becoming a person of love. At a crucial point in his story, he exclaims, "Why, I don't even love myself!" The practice of God's love in the world begins with the regular discovery of God's extravagant love for each of us. The love I experience for myself in God's light will be the same growing love available to everyone. Growing in this action love that Paul challenges us to do is grounded in our human struggle.

Before we get caught up in what fall always brings, write down Jesus' words on a post-it note, make them your screen saver on your computer, set your phone alarm for the same time each day to remind yourself that more often than not, people will attempt to put Immanuel aside in favor of efficiency, ease, and the bottom line, remember Jesus' promise.

When you are in a meeting, a hospital room, fellowship time, bible study, Jesus is there among you. When you are making decisions about where your offerings will go or whom your church will welcome, Jesus is there among you. When your church questions if it will speak up or stay silent, Jesus is there among you. When you are discussing your vision, your mission statement, your future, Jesus is there among you.

Prayer

Holy God, our world has been wracked by violence. Things seem to be falling apart, and all we can do sometimes is focus on our own lives, our own homes, our own community, and move forward. Help us to seek you, and to turn our focus away from ourselves and to see how we can be a difference in the world. Guide us in your ways of love, justice and mercy; so that we might live the life you have set before us. Help us to trust in you, when things are falling apart, that You will help us move on, and You will always lead us into new life. In the name of Christ our Savior we pray. Amen.

