

“And There Is Still Room” / Luke 14:1, 7, 15b-23 / 1 September 2013

And after all the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame had been called from the alleyways of life into the great feast, the servant declared, “There is still room.”

I'm always teasing my mother-in-law for the pithy advice and cute sayings that she has stenciled around her house. Things like, “Live well. Laugh often. Love much.” “Be nice or leave.” One surprisingly insightful statement that she has above her kitchen sink says, “Family is always better around the table.” It's true, too. Look around this room. It's clearly not a dining room, and yet the whole thing is centered around this table. Every time we meet, we gather around our table, just like the disciples in their Upper Room, and just like the poor, and the crippled, the blind, and the lame in Jesus' parable. People's identities have always been shaped and formed while seated at a table.

If you've ever been to our place in South Fayette, then you may have noticed that we have a grand old dining room table big enough to seat ten. Since moving here three years ago, we had to insert all of the leaves into that table just so that it would fill up the cavernous dining room in the old farmhouse that we purchased. It's not a beautiful table, though it may have seemed stylish back in the late 60s. It's made of some nondescript wood that I couldn't name. It wobbles a little bit. Dogs have left their teeth marks on the table's legs. And the edges of the table bear many dark smudges from forty-five years of use, forty-five years of family dinners, forty-five years of kids doing their homework, forty-five long years of doing taxes, and paying bills, and spilling coffee. Forty-five years of birthday cakes, and brooding silences, laughter, and arguments, and neglect. No antique dealer will ever want the table, even though we've got matching chairs, a matching buffet, and matching china cupboard. It's just not a vintage antique. In fact, I happen to know that that table was purchased brand new at a store where they also wrapped your meat in white paper with string, a store where jars of pickled pigs feet stood on the shelf behind the butcher's counter. No, our old table was not crafted by Drexel Heritage, and yet, it is one of the few possessions that I truly value. You see, I've been sitting at that same table, off and on, for most my life. It's our old family table. Back when I was a kid, there were seven of us seated at this selfsame table: my two parents, my sister, my three brothers, and me. And when my parents decided that they no longer needed such a big table, they passed the whole dining room set along to Michelle and me. Now once again I sit nearly everyday at the old table where I sat growing up, except that now I get to sit in my father's chair, the only one with armrests.

Sometimes when the family's away, or I'm writing a sermon on a Saturday night, I find myself alone at that table, and I can almost sense the presence of the many ghosts that gather round me there. The long-dead grandparents who will never sit there again. The long-ago brothers and the sister, people who are still alive, but who are so changed, so different from the persons I once knew. And, of course, all the little selves who are no more because they've evolved, over the decades, into the one full-grown self that I am today. At times like those, I think back on the worries that seemed so big at the time, cares and troubles that I brought to that very table: And sometimes, alone at that table, I sneak back in time to remember the things that used to happen right there around that very board. The youthful hopes that each of us once brought to it, the wounds that we inflicted and received right there around that very table! I'll never escape so much of what happened around that one table.

Even if I didn't have that table in my dining room today, a part of me would still be seated at it daily. For good and for ill, I'll forever be who I am because of things that happened, and words that were said, and glances that were exchanged around that very table. *A table*—more than a couch, more than a bed—*a table* is a symbol of what it means to belong. *A table* is about welcome, acceptance, identity, family, home.

And there's such power in being welcomed to someone's table. Remember, back in school, how you had to sit at the right table, with the right people, or else it would send the wrong message about who you understood yourself to be? Remember how the popular athletes sat with the other popular athletes. And by some unfair twist of fate, those popular athletes were usually the best

students, too. Birds of a feather dined together. Many of those cafeteria tables were off limits, and newcomers need not apply. The new kid at school always faces the question, “Where do I sit?” Of course, you could sit at any table you liked if you were invited to sit there. How powerful, an invitation to the table! No matter your age, there’s always significance in being welcomed to a table. Dinner with a new neighbor. A date. A business lunch. Your first time in the cafeteria of a new school. There’s always significance and meaning in being invited to take your place at the table, whatever the table. There are things that churches get right and things that they get wrong. I believe that one of the wrongest things a church can do is to bar people from Jesus' table—which is God's feast of welcome for all people.

And now we sit gathered once again around our old family table, the table where each of us has been sitting—perhaps off and on—for so much of our lives. How many times have you sat around this table—or one very much like it? How many of your life’s most significant moments gather round you here like so many ghosts of bygone selves? The worship, the weddings, the baptisms, the funerals. How many joys have you brought here over the years; how many tears have you bottled up and held back right here at this table? How many anguished prayers have you offered here? How many hours of boredom have you spent sitting round the table, waiting for a dry and rambling sermon to reach a belated close? How many distracted thoughts, and worries, and griefs have haunted you, as you took your place here at the table? How many wounds have you received—and inflicted—while seated here at our table? You’ve become the person you are today because of words that were said and glances that were exchanged here at this table. This is your old family table. It’s our table.

And a motley, random family we are! At least in a spiritual sense, we are the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame who’ve been called in from the byways of life. Who invited you and me? Which of us—by rights—might not be sitting in a very different place this morning? If not for a gracious invitation from the Master of the house, which of us might not be sitting instead at the tables of isolation, tables of meaninglessness, tables of despair? Unlikely invitees that we are! Which of us wasn’t called here from the roads, and the streets, and the lanes of the town? Which of us comes here because we had the wisdom to choose it, or the goodness to earn it? We have, all of us, been called in from the byways of life and given a place at this rich table. Grace: it comes from outside of you.

Grace! You can't manufacture it. You can't earn it. You can't purchase it. Grace! It pulls you away from all the things that used to seem so important: the blindness of materialism, the lameness of seeking power, the poorness of throwing our lives into selfish causes. Grace. It invites you in and gives you a place at life's table. And all we can do, then, is to live in grateful response to the grace that dusts us off, treats us with dignity and respect, and seats us here at the Master's table. For our tables are not really ours, nor our houses, nor our educations, nor our incomes. Did we give ourselves the skills that we've used to attain them? Did we give ourselves the wherewithal to provide for our families and our retirements? Did we choose our place of birth, or our genetic makeup, or our families of origin? We did not. They come from outside of us. And all we can do, then, is to live grateful and generous lives, investing ourselves in the words and the acts that call others, too, to the table. Grace teaches us to love all the other poor folks, and crippled folks, and blind folks, and lame folks who people our world outside these doors, as well as the ones who are seated here with us by the Master’s invitation. Here we all sit—all of us—by grace at life's rich table, stretched across the centuries. Here we all sit with people so unlike us! And—as the servant says—there is still room. Amen.