

The Table

Today I want to talk about the <Table.> Many of us will spend significant time around tables with family and friends in the coming days as we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, and perhaps even more so as we celebrate Advent and Christmas in the weeks to follow. In a few minutes we are going to come to this Table, the table of Christ, to participate in the Lord's Supper. And even as I prepared this sermon Pastor Taylor reminded me that the Table is important **imagery** that he uses in his preaching, that we use in the **shaping** of our **church culture** here at SLBC. So the Table seemed to me to be an appropriate point of conversation this morning.

TECH Note: Image of Scotty with brisket

Many of you know that I've found a new passion/hobby in my life, and that's barbecue. That being said, if you ever hear me around the church saying I'm going to be "smoking tonight" I'm talking about the crafting of delicious Texas barbecue, **not** inhaling a substance. I love everything about the process of smoking meat... selecting, trimming, applying rubs, maintaining a balanced fire with clean smoke, to throwing the meat on and meticulously monitoring, to resting, and then to then in a thrilling moment, getting the big knife and taking off that first slice and tasting that first bite of smoky, peppery goodness. Anyone who tells you that Texas barbecue isn't an artform doesn't know what they're talking about.

But the reason I enjoy barbecue so much is actually not because of any of those steps, though they give me life. I love smoking meats and making barbecue because barbecue allows me to share a quality meal with friends and family around the **table**. I've learned that when I smoke a brisket or a rack of spare ribs, I don't have to look far to find company who will sit at the table on my back patio and eat with me. Good barbecue leads to good **friendships**, good **conversations**, good **times** at the table.

If you really think about it, <Tables are a significant part of our lives> So many of life's most memorable and special moments happen at the table. When we think of tables, of course we think of food, but really we think of **holidays**, **family** gatherings, first **dates**, **weddings**, **banquets**, job **interviews**, job **offers**, birthday **parties**, and the **sports bar** where we watch the Astros with dozens of other fans. If you grew up in a Baptist church, especially in a rural setting, you may think of

church potlucks when you think of the table, and **what will most of us do** as soon as we are dismissed from this worship service or our Bible study today? We will **scatter** to tables at various restaurants and homes to share in a Sunday lunch, many of us with our family and friends. **<Tables are a significant part of our lives>**

Not only are tables significant to us, but **they appear to be significant in the Bible as well**. In fact **<Tables are a significant part of the Biblical narrative.>** There are many symbols and images that retain importance throughout the entire Bible but the table is one of the most prominent from front to back. Off the top of my head I can think of the sacrificial altars where the people of Israel offered their sacrifices to God. In Exodus 25 as God provides instructions for the building of the Tabernacle, there are eight verses detailing the grand table made of acacia wood that stood in that holy place. When David's best friend Jonathan learned that his father, King Saul, was plotting to have David assassinated, Jonathan famously makes a scene of standing up from the dinner table and storming out in an act of rebuke towards his father. David would go on to write in his most famous Psalm, Psalm 23, "You prepare a table in the presence of my enemies." I think of Daniel, taken captive in the Babylonian exile and led to a foreign land, refusing to eat from the king's table as an act of obedience and loyalty to Israel's God. I think of the Apostle Peter, who was devastated and shamed after denying Jesus three times the night of the crucifixion, and his reconciliation with Jesus over a campfire breakfast. I think of Peter a short time later, as he's leading the church in Jerusalem, and he's confused about whether God really wants to save the Gentiles, and God gives Peter a vision of a table and an "impure" Gentile meal, reminding Peter that the Law of Moses could not and would not save. And in this beautiful story the Bible ends with a table, a wedding feast, where all of God's children will eat alongside the Messiah in paradise. More on that, in a minute...

Not only are tables significant to the overarching Biblical narrative, but **more specifically**, **<Tables are significant to Jesus.>** And you know this if you've read any of the Gospel accounts. Luke alone reports 10 different significant instances where Jesus is part of a meal. Jesus was continually sharing tables with folks from all walks of life, dining with **sinners** and **traitors** and **religious elites** // and **poor** and **wealthy** // and **Jews** and **Romans** // and **men** and **women** and **everyone** in between. I think of those tables, those dinner tables that looked sort of like this one on the screen, low to the floor surrounded

by pillows and cushions where diners lounged as they shared food and conversation.. I also think of the tables belonging to the cheating moneychangers in the Temple, the priests who took advantage of foreigners and those in poverty, those tables which Jesus threw over in holy rebuke. I think, perhaps most significantly, of the table where Jesus and His disciples shared their Last Supper before Jesus walked the road to Calvary.

TECH Note: "Table" title card

So tables are a fixture of the Bible, they're a theme of Jesus's ministry, and they remain an important part of our lives and social structures... perhaps the question for us this morning is why? Why was the idea of Table important to God in the first place? Why does the imagery of Table persist even today? I want to suggest this morning that the Table stands for the values that we should embrace in our day-to-day lives. The Apostle Paul, who was radically transformed by the love of Jesus, wrote:

Romans 12:2 (NIV)

<2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.>

And... be honest... transformation is a long process. It's hard to renew our minds. It's difficult to be sculpted and shaped by God, especially if you've been religious for a long time and feel like you've mostly got it figured out. But this morning I'd submit to you that the Holy Spirit wants at least part of that transformation to occur by setting the values of the Table at the forefront of your mind. Because there is nothing more relevant, more radical, more countercultural, or more hopeful than the values of the Table.

You see <The table teaches us how to relate to other people.> A table is best understood when more than one person sits at its edges, that's why we have an entirely different word for a table designed for one person; we call that a desk. A table is about multiple people gathered over something shared in between them, whether it's a meal or a card game. But I want to emphasize that the Table teaches us that this language I used on the slide is too impersonal; the first thing we learn at the Table is that all people are made in the image of God, and so <The table teaches us how to relate to other image-bearers.>

All people—regardless of their **station** in life, regardless of their **appearance**, and regardless of any quality which might make them **distinctive**—all people are made in the image of God. This is a fundamental truth and it's the starting point for the Table. Not one human being you encounter is made without the imprint of the Divine. Each person in our world is made in God's holy image.

Jesus, being both fully God and fully man, understood this intimately. So when he sat at tables during his life he had little tolerance for those people who didn't recognize the Imago Dei, the image of God, in another. You may remember once instance where a woman labeled "sinful" comes barging into a nice dinner weeping and pouring perfume over Jesus's feet, and while the others in the room condemn her Jesus affirms her humanity and thereby the very image of God; meanwhile the elites in the room chose to criticize, judge, and doubt Jesus because of his willingness to affirm this woman they'd labeled, categorized, and thus discarded as **something other** than an image-bearer.

Open up your copy of the Scriptures to Luke 14, if you will. In another instance—and Pastor Taylor just preached this text in August so this should be familiar to you—Jesus is dining with the elite religious leaders of his day, the ones who society thought were closest to God. Put yourself in this text, if you will, and recognize that when the Gospels talk about the Pharisees, they weren't seen as evil, horrible enemies of God the way we often view them in 2021; they were viewed in much the same way as we view **our** favorite pastors, Christian influencers, or celebrities. They were viewed by their peers as the God-fearing standard for which all others should strive to emulate.

The controversy at this dinner begins when Jesus heals a man in front of the Pharisees. Typically this wouldn't be an issue but this was the Sabbath day. So Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees scold him for it, and Jesus remarks,

Luke 14:5–11 (NIV)

<5 "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, **will you not** immediately pull it out?">

To which every parent or rancher in the room would have had to answer, "Well of course." And that's Jesus's point. And that's why ...

<6 **they had nothing to say.**>

And that's the thing about Jesus, isn't it? He points out our **hypocrisy**. He shows us places where we're willing to **compromise**, where we're **fraudulent**—where we hold ourselves to different **standards** than we hold others to—if you're following Jesus and *not* feeling some sort of tension in your character, you *aren't* convicted about your convictions, or you *don't* have any motivation to grow as a person, well you might identify as a Christian but you aren't a Jesus follower. Because... well, remember what Paul said?...

Romans 12:2 (NIV)

<2 Do not **conform** to the pattern of this world, but be **transformed** by the **renewing** of your **mind**.>

And Paul isn't writing that instruction to pagans in Rome, he's writing to the Christians in Rome, to the First Baptist Church of Rome... and, by proxy, to Sugar Land Baptist Church in Texas. The mind that needs renewal and transformation is **yours**. Back to Jesus. Immediately after Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees at this table, he notices something else:

Luke 14:5–11 (NIV)

<7 When he noticed how the guests picked the **places of honor** at the table...>

Which is ironic, right? Here the Creator of time and space sits in their midst at the Table, and they honor themselves? Anyway, Jesus did what Jesus does and <7 **he told them this parable**:> Jesus often taught in parables because through a simple story or illustration, He could portray an eternal theological truth. Here's what he said,

<8 "When someone invites you to a **wedding feast ...**> Don't forget the wedding feast thing, this is the second time I've mentioned it, and we're coming back to it. But for now, let's continue reading: <8 "**do not** take the place of honor, for a person **more distinguished** than you may have been invited.>

TECH Note: Next slide

<9 If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, **humiliated**, you will have to take the **least important** place.> The least important seat because that's the seat nobody else wanted. Because that's the only spot left empty.

Again, Jesus knows what they don't know, or rather can't recognize, which is that God is literally sitting in the room across from them. So as we read the account we are terribly embarrassed for the Pharisees. They look like absolute fools who are being humiliated on the pages of history. And then Jesus teaches them—and us—the lesson:

<10 But when you are invited, take the **lowest place**, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be **honored** in the presence of all the other guests.>

TECH Note: Next slide

<11 For all those who **exalt** themselves will be **humbled**, and those who **humble** themselves will be **exalted**.>

And we all read that and think, "Aww, that's so sweet! I'm going to get on Etsy and buy that a canvas with that verse to hang in my entry hall!" TECH Note: Picture of Canvas with the Scripture on it

But this isn't cute, and it's not just nice flowery language; this is a statement of bold **challenge**, of **critique**, and it hits most of us **right between the eyes**. Jesus is challenging a paradigm that still exists in our society today. He's challenging the ways we rank and categorize people, the ways we **elevate** some and **denigrate** others, any of our worldviews that create systems of bias, and privilege, and injustice. He is asking each of us to look at the wide and diverse tapestry of humanity, and ask ourselves where we think ourselves better than anyone else. Because if you... if I... dare to think yourself, myself better than anyone else, we are not on the way of Jesus. **Full stop**. When I see society as an order of people who are increasingly better or worse than others, when I view myself above anyone—based on position or wealth or race or spoken language or heritage or gender or sexuality or neighborhood or political alignment or even Christian denominational alignment—I have insulted not only a person, but the very image of Almighty God. And I don't know about you, but I do not want to go about in any way insulting the image of God. You and I are to put ourselves at the bottom of the order, see ourselves as the lowest, because we each know our own darkness, depravity, and despair. I am not better than anyone else. And neither are you. And actually, according to Jesus, that's a great thing. It's exactly where we are called to be.

Shauna Niequist has authored devotional books and recipe books that explore how God's love intersects us through the table and through food, and I love the wisdom found in these words she penned: <The table is the great equalizer, the level playing field many of us have been looking for. The table is the place where the doing stops, the trying stops, the masks are removed, and we allow ourselves to be nourished, like children.> You see friend, this is good for us. Jesus is asking you to take off your masks, remove your pretention, forget about whatever rules you use to rank people into categories, and come to the table for healing, for reconciliation, for wholeness, for love.

So those were Jesus's words for the religious elites, and as if that isn't challenging enough for us this morning, Jesus had even more specific words for his disciples. For those in this room who would say "I have a relationship with Jesus, I follow him," he has even further instructions. In John 17, Jesus has just finished teaching His disciples as they've participated in the Last Supper. He has washed their feet, He has served them bread and wine, He has given them one final message of instruction and encouragement, and He is now praying. God is praying. The Son is speaking to the Father. And this prayer, while seated at the table of the Last Supper, obviously stuck with John, who reports this for us, and it's easy to see why because what Jesus asks God the Father for amazed him, and it will amaze you.

John 17:20–21 (NIV)

<20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ... all of them">

Friend, this is God's prayer for you. This is God's prayer for me. This is God's prayer for us. God prayed...

<20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one ...">

There's another canvas you could buy on Etsy, right? We talk a lot about unity or the idea of being united in church. And frankly this isn't just a Christian idea, but it's historically a fundamental American idea as well. After all we live in a country named the "United" states of America, right? We love unity! Unity is great! But Jesus gets more specific...

<20 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that **all of them may be one** Father, **just as** you are in me and I am in you. **21** May they also **be in us...**>

This is... this is shocking. It's no wonder John couldn't forget it and had to write it down. One of the most important doctrines of Christianity is **monotheism**, which is to say that we place our faith in one singular God. Not multiple gods. Specifically for us, not three gods, but One God. A Triune God. A Holy Trinity, three persons of Father, Son and Spirit so perfectly united into One Holy Being. One God. It's one of the great mysteries of our faith but it is one Jesus proves to be true. Jesus and the Father are so perfectly in sync with one another, so aligned, that they are one singular being. And, apparently, **when that God has a prayer request**, it's that we would be just as unified and in-step with each other as Jesus is with the Father. So united in fact that we are seen as one **being**, one **organism**, one **Bride** (the Church) awaiting the Kingdom of God.

If this is God's foremost **prayer request** for us, that we'd be united despite our many distinctions and opinions and convictions and conflicts, then unity is more important than the musical style or which pastor is preaching. Unity is more important than “standing up” for your particular camp or worldview. In a complete shock to our Bible-belt and Baptist sensibilities—perhaps unity is more important than being “right.” We are to seek unity across boundaries first and foremost because as each of us are created in the image of God. So catch this: because each of us is created in God's Image, Jesus prays that his Bride, the Church, would also reflect God's Image, but specifically, the unity found within the Trinity. Note that **unity does not require uniformity**; the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct, yet they are one. So should we be.

Why? Jesus mentions that in his prayer, as well: <21 **so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**>

Christian culture warriors want you to believe that the world is so against us because they hate goodness, they don't like Jesus, or they're irredeemably sinful. The reality is this: most non-Christians I've gotten to know don't have a problem with Jesus, His teachings, the idea of the Divine, or even the idea that they have sin in their

lives—they don't like the church. And frankly, keep this between you and me: when I felt definitively called by God into ministry, it was because I was in a season where I didn't like the church, either. Because too often the American church has been content to bicker, fight, split up, and put up walls rather than do the difficult, **holy** thing: seek peace and unity across all lines of distinction.

Jesus doubles down on this prayer in verses 22 and 23, but I believe the point has been made clear this morning. As Christians we talk a lot about **seeking** God's will and God not only made it clear for us—God **prayed** it for us: Be one as I am one.

<The table teaches us how to **relate** to other **image-bearers**.> We are all on the same playing field and in the same boat. Not one of us is better than another. And within these walls, and even when we interact with Christians from other camps and denominations and churches, the will of God is that we'd be united as one holy Bride.

The challenges are clear. Our sins of pride and selfishness have been laid bare before us this morning. **But the student pastor didn't come up on the platform to bring bad news to the congregation this morning**, I came on Thanksgiving week to bring good news for which each of us should rejoice and be thankful. The reason we need to see **ourselves** rightly, to see **others** rightly, to be **united**, to be **compassionate**, to be **humble**, to seek the **lowest** position, is because a great wedding feast is being prepared. **The last table in the Bible is the table ahead of us**. Jesus mentions this banquet in Luke 22 but we're going to look at what John sees as God grants him a great revelation on the Island of Patmos, and he has a glimpse of the Kingdom of God fully realized at the end of time. He first sees the heavenly congregation singing a hymn, and it goes like this:

Revelation 19:6–8 (NIV)

<"Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the **wedding** of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear.">

And after the hymn is sung, an angel speaks directly to John, check out verse nine:

Revelation 19:9 (NIV)

<Then the angel said to me, "Write this: **Blessed** are those who are **invited** to the **wedding supper** of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God.">

My friends, we don't have a really clear picture of what the end times will be like. And we certainly can't comprehend what the Kingdom of God will be like with its absence of all sin, pain, and despair. But we do know this: **There's a table that is set.** There's a feast that will be enjoyed. And it's all to celebrate that the Creator wants an **intimate** relationship with the Creation, as **intimate** as the relationship between married partners. Friends, **<The table reveals how God relates to us.>** Maybe you've struggled with the concept of God. Maybe you've pictured God as an angry **parent** scolding you every time you make a mistake. Maybe you've viewed God as a vengeful **judge** at the bench, waiting to sentence you to your punishment. Maybe you've viewed God as a cosmic **tyrant**, a **warlord**, or even a nonchalant **couch potato** watching you struggle through life without a care to interfere or help. But here we see God as a **husband**, wedding arranged, feast prepared, **awaiting and beckoning the bride to come and find her true home.** At the Table of the Wedding Feast we see that God is patient, loving, tender, and kind. We see that God celebrates our victories and quickly forgives and restores us when we are defeated.

Could it be possible that the Creator is so **loving**, so **welcoming**, so **inclusive**, and so **gracious**, that His Kingdom will be like a Wedding Feast where everyone is invited? Not only is that vision possible, it's what John sees in Revelation. And it's what Jesus describes throughout his ministry. And it's a wedding and a feast and a table that you are invited to this morning. You aren't invited because you're a good person, because we've already acknowledged this morning that you aren't better than anyone else. You aren't invited because you won a cosmic lottery. You're invited to the Table because God loves you. As Pastor Jonathan Martin said, **<We come to the table not because we are holy, but because we are in need of His holiness. We come to the table not because we are strong, but because we are weak and in need of His strength.>**

TECH Note: Back to the "Table" titlecard

Some of you have already accepted Jesus as your Lord. You've got a spot saved for you at the wedding feast. But I wonder this morning if you live life in a way that embraces that wedding, that feast. I wonder if you strive to be united with other Christians so that the Bride will be ready to walk down the aisle on that day. I wonder if you are willing to take the "least important" seat so others can attend the feast. I wonder if your lifestyle stands as a countercultural invitation of inclusion; that your neighbors and co-workers and friends would watch you live and know they are welcome at the Table of God.

Some of you, maybe, have never accepted Jesus's invitation to the wedding feast. Maybe you've had an incorrect view of God, and that evil tyrant God is someone you want nothing to do with. Maybe the church has hurt you, discouraged you, or failed to include you. If that's the case, the church has failed. I'd invite you this morning to see Jesus for who He is, to accept the invitation, and to take your seat at the wedding feast. And if you need a church home, this one isn't perfect, but we are doing our best to be a place where you can be known, loved, and involved as we prepare for the Kingdom of God to be our forever home.

And for every Christian in the building today, we look ahead to that wedding feast by partaking this morning in the Lord's Supper. The practice of taking communion is a worshipful act that reminds us that we have a place at God's Table through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As we partake in a few minutes, don't merely look to the cross in the past or your sin in the present; but look, also, to the future. To the wedding feast. To the Table. And thank God you've been saved a seat. [And what an opportunity you've been given to welcome others to sit at the Table, both yours and God's.](#) Would you join me in a word of prayer?