

“The Table of Love”  
September 10, 2023  
15th Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 13: 8-14  
Matthew 18: 15-20  
Rev. Anne Schlesinger

This week as we continue our series focussing on tables, we remember that although the table we focus upon in church is hosted by our Lord, it is not our only table. How often do you sit down at a table to eat? When my children were young, we sat down to dinner together every night. That was very important to me. I would get annoyed with my partner when ever he said, “Oh, no, go ahead and eat without me. I had a late lunch today.” Eating together as a family was much more important to me than to anyone else in my household, perhaps because that was “normal” for me. It was the way my family of origin functioned. My mother was employed outside the home part-time only after I, her youngest child, was in high school. Her primary focus and life’s work was definitely taking care of family and home. David grew up in a very different environment. His dad was a very busy, high powered attorney who worked very long hours. His mom was a computer engineer for IBM. His parents divorced when he was thirteen, and my guess is that family meals were rare, except on major holidays. So what was normative for me was not for him. Besides, I was a homeschool Mom who also tended to my grandchildren almost every day, and as a social creature, I looked forward to having adult conversation around the dinner table. David worked in an office with hundreds of other adults, and he is an introvert, so he looked forward to quiet, alone time in front of the television or his computer. Was one of us wrong and the other right? I don’t think so, and we somehow made it work.

That said, sitting down at a table together, whether for a meal or family game night or just casual conversation is good for us. Even having difficult conversations around a table—but perhaps not at dinner—is good for us, too. That’s not just my opinion, it is also the opinion of health experts. According to Stanford Medical Children’s Health, “When a family sits down together, it helps them handle the stresses of daily life and the hassles of day-to-day existence. Eating together tends to promote more sensible eating habits, which in turn helps family members manage their weight more easily.”<sup>1</sup> But it isn’t just eating together. Spending time together binds families together, even if it’s only 10 or 15 minutes without television, cell phones and reading material. Talking together, listening to one another, and sharing even the seemingly trivial, mundane things of life is important for building a life together. Being at the same table is important.

One of the major disruptions that COVID wrought is the lack of eating together as a community of faith. Do you miss potlucks? We Methodists get teased about our penchant for potlucks. I had a pastor some years ago who preached about two churches on the same block. Neither had a parking lot large enough for their entire congregation, so they vied for the parking spaces on the street. Pastor said anyone could tell the Methodists from the Baptists because the Baptists all carried Bibles, and the Methodists all carried casseroles. I am not by any means saying that reading and studying the Bible is unimportant, but I do believe that gathering at the family table—whether that is your family of origin, or your family by choice, or your church family—is essential for building the loving relationships about which Paul was writing to the church at Rome. “Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments... are all summed up in one word: [LOVE].” That is the debt we owe to one another.

I was in a Conference meeting yesterday, and the convener asked each of us to define the word “unity” and describe what it means to us. Being all United Methodists, at least one of us had to quote John Wesley who said, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=why-the-family-meal-is-important>

we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?"<sup>2</sup> We can love one another even when we disagree, if we can learn to listen to one another. That may mean putting down our social media platforms and sitting at the table together. I can't remember where I heard or read this story, but I heard someone complimenting a woman for her non-violent communication skills. She and another person had completely different ideas about gun control. After the woman expressed her opinion, the other person began ranting about how "stupid" her opinion was and raging about her liberal perspective. But instead of reacting to this man's insults, the woman maintained her composure and said, "Oh, please tell me what brought you to that perspective. Please help me understand." The two people did not come to a consensus on the subject of gun control, or any other subject for that matter, but the first speaker's composure diffused the tension and allowed conversation to happen.

People develop opinions many different ways. It could be a cultural difference that influences someone's opinion, or a painful thing in someone's past that causes strong reactions to a differing opinion. Until that pain is addressed, it can manifest as resentment and anxiety in our relationships. Rev. Ben Hensley said, "Anxiety is like yeast, and the more people that get pulled into a disagreement or conflict that, at first, just involved two people, the more it has an opportunity to grow."<sup>3</sup> Jesus teaches how we can dissipate that anxiety and resentment. First, discuss your hurt with the person who hurt you while the two of you are alone. If that doesn't resolve the problem, bring a friend or two as uninvolved witnesses who can help you to understand each other. If that still doesn't work, bring it to the church—i.e., community—to find a solution. If none of that works, walk away, and sever the relationship without hurting each other or the community. Never turn your hurt into hatred. Love one another.

I am going to end with yet another John Wesley quote. Many of you know that Wesley never intended Methodism to become a separate denomination. John Wesley's father was an Anglican rector and his mother was the daughter of a "dissenting" (Puritan) minister. All the Wesley children were strictly raised and given vigorous religious instruction. John and his younger brother Charles were both educated at Christ Church, Oxford and were ordained in the Anglican Church. While at school they formed a group called "The Holy Club" to cultivate inner holiness. They met daily for reading scripture, prayer, study and service, but were mocked by their peers for being too methodical. Thus the Methodist movement within the Anglican Church was born. But there was always controversy. To that, Wesley responded, "What religion do I preach? The religion of love; the law of kindness brought to light by the Gospel. What is it good for? To make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves: to make them like God; lovers of all... Thanks be unto God, who giveth me the victory, through my Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, quoted by Jacey Pickens-Jones in a CUIR meeting 9/9/23.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Ben A. Hensley. "Sermon Fodder." Source: <https://worship-design-studio.mn.co/posts/series-come-to-the-table-sermon-fodder>

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley. "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion 1743". *Works*, V., quoted from <https://renovare.org/articles/which-gospel-wesley-can-help>