

The Table

Inviting People Who Are Racially/Ethnically/Culturally Different

Part 2 – September 1, 2019

[Matthew 22: 34-40 and Galatians 5: 13-15](#)

Nicole: Today, we are continuing on in our series, "*The Table*." In this series, we are taking a look at how Christians can make room at God's table for all people. We are talking about the spiritual table of inclusion, but also the natural table of relationship-building, particularly with people who are different from us in some shape or form.

Pastor Dave: (put your welcome here)

In today's message, we are going to challenge ourselves. We are going to talk about one of the differences that hold us back from expanding our table, and our invitations, and our faith with other people. That difference is cultural, ethnic, and racial differences.

God's love is expansive, and it includes everyone. During Jesus's ministry, he often ate at the table with people who were different from Him, people who were excluded or shunned in society. Even when people were hostile toward him and toward those he loved, Jesus spent time building relationships with people. His love for others and his inclusion of all people can serve as our foundation of faith today as we reach out to others who need to know more about Him and His love.

It is relatively easy to express love with words. Saying that we love all people, that God loves everyone, that there is room at God's table for all--that's easy. It's very...Christian. But doing the work of actually reaching across social lines to invite someone to a physical table of shared food and shared experiences is where the really hard work of reflecting God's love begins.

Nicole: Let's take a closer look at our **first passage**. In Matthew 22, verses 37-39, Jesus said that the first and the greatest commandment is to love God with all we have, and the second is to love our neighbors the same way that we love ourselves. Both are equally important.

This table is a metaphor for God's love. If we are believers in Christ and followers of Christ, we are all a part of the family of God. God extended a spiritual invitation and we accepted it, plain and simple. We didn't get invited to be a part of God's family because of how good we are or because of the good works that we have done. It is not because we are American, or because we grew up Methodist. It is not because we are more deserving than another person. It is because God first loved us and welcomed us to sit at the table--to become Christian and to be part of a larger family.

We got to be part of God's family through Jesus.

Someone loved God and loved us enough to share the faith with us. To be like Christ, we have to do the same thing. Just as God loved everyone in the world so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to save us all, we are invited to offer our whole lives to God in love--to love the Lord with everything we have, our whole heart. We are also to show our love for God in what we do, which includes demonstrating love to other people.

Sheri is my oldest and dearest friend. She and I met in high school. She immediately integrated me into the things that she and her family did. This integration started at the dinner table.

Sheri shared with me the love of God in some tangible ways. I was an only child, so I was glad to be included in all types of family activities. Sheri and her family also had strong community roots--something I didn't have because my family moved around a lot. Her family was also a part of a faith community and lived out their faith in social justice. I was a

lapsed Catholic on one side of my family and a hodgepodge of various Protestant persuasions on the other. I hardly ever went to church.

What if Sheri had just decided to be friends only with people who lived in their neighborhood, or people they knew from middle school, or people from their church? I would have missed an essential lifelong connection that I have, one that has helped to sustain me in many trying times.

Pastor Dave:

Our **second passage** of scripture today is from Galatians 5. We are encouraged to use the freedom that has come from living in Christ to serve one another. Paul says in verse 14, "For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

As disciples, we cannot just focus on ourselves and our friends.

We have to look to others around us and see where the needs are. We are to love people we consider "other" the same way that we love ourselves. Do we care about our own eternity? We have to care about theirs. We care about our own emotions and how we feel when we are prejudged and excluded? Then we have to avoid doing those same things to our neighbors. If we were lost and in need, we would want someone to help us, so we have to extend ourselves in the same way to those who God puts in our path.

We can talk about how God loves everyone, and how we are siblings in Christ, and we are all equal and welcomed and the word of God is inclusive. But, what about us? Are we inclusive? Are we welcoming? As representatives of Christ, is our love for other people expansive in a tangible, day-to-day way?

How is God's love reflected at our tables?

(Dave - cross-cultural meal story or comment) On our last visit to Israel our tour group was invited to have dinner with some people from the area we were visiting. We were in the area of Bethlehem and you might know that that means we were in the Palestinian area. We were invited by groups of two – four to go to the home of a Palestinian family and share dinner and a conversation.

Julie and I ended up with a multi-generational family who were nothing shy of wonderful. The plan worked. Prejudices and preconceived notions disappeared as we discovered the story from the people we were sharing a meal with. I will never hear the issues concerning the Palestinians in the same way again.

Nicole: Sitting down and sharing a meal has strong cultural and religious roots. One of the central questions of the gospels was, "with whom can I eat?" We will talk more about this next week, but to Jewish people, meals were very cultural and signified specific boundaries between their group and others. It was not common during Biblical times for Jewish people to eat with people who were not Jewish due to cultural food laws. This separation at mealtime reflected and reinforced social boundaries. Food and meals are communal and can serve to signify who is in and who is out.

But that isolation around the dinner table was not always the case and is not the case now in Jewish culture. There are some current Jewish traditions around meals that can help us today consider the importance of inviting others to the table. The [Shabbat meal](#) has religious and spiritual components to it, so that even if you are not Jewish, you can learn something about the faith and the people who practice it. This includes singing hymns, lighting candles, and sharing a cup of wine and bread before the meal. Learning some of the Torah or the Jewish book of laws, for example, is considered proper at a traditional Jewish meal. At the Shabbat meal during the Sabbath, guests are an integral part of that weekly meal. Family members are expected and encouraged to invite other people to the table.

There is a custom at the [Seder table](#) during Passover to have an empty chair at the table. A cup of wine is poured and an announcement is made: "All those who are in need, come and eat!" A Seder table is a place where the [story of slavery and redemption](#) is told. As we know, Jews were enslaved in Egypt. This dinner at Passover time is not just a lesson for Jews in history, but those at the table talk about how they themselves [see their own freedom](#). They are encouraged to see themselves and their family members as part of the story of Jews coming out of Egypt. Their current experiences are connected to the past and it's a powerful opportunity to look into their future.

Pastor Dave: Ironically, this week is the [400th anniversary](#) of the first arrival of Africans on American soil: August 1619, a year before the *Mayflower*. Here in the U.S., we are *not* encouraged to see our legacy as continuing from our past or to emphasize a connection between previous events and how we live now. Quite the opposite. Culturally, we are pushed to see slavery as an event from long ago that has nothing to do with today, when we know that this is not true. Our history still affects our interactions across ethnic and racial lines.

For example, I learned in my study for this message that there is a thing called a "[slave Bible](#)." You may know that slaves were not allowed to read or to gather together. There was always someone overseeing them. The message of Christianity that was taught to slaves left out about 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament. These sections of the Bible that were left out all related to liberation, freedom, and equality--including the Jews' escape from Egypt that is celebrated at Passover.

The history of our racial divide as Methodists is even closer. John Wesley called American slavery "the vilest thing that ever saw the sun." After he died in 1791, segregation within [Methodist](#) churches increased. Different branches of Methodism developed over racial divides. In 1939, three methodist denominations united to form the Methodist Church, but segregated African Americans into a separate jurisdiction that continued until 1968. It wasn't until 2000 that some (not all) General Conference delegates participated in a repentance service for racism, and 2004 when the UMC recognized and celebrated the African American spiritual witness in our church of those who stayed in spite of racism.

Just like the cultural meal and teaching happens at the Seder dinner, we, too, have an opportunity to look at our future and to create one of liberation that is different from the past. Discrimination and bigotry are rooted in fear and not in love. These things are based on falsehoods and misinformation and not on the love of the Lord that can and should be shared between people of different groups.

Nicole: As disciples, we are charged with making new disciples. *Love God. Love Others. Make Disciples.* The loving God part is easy. God is great! God is good! Even when things don't go our way, we can see the loving hand of God moving in our lives and in the lives of others. We see miracles of all kinds every day. Loving others...that's harder. It easy to love nice people, and babies, and people that we are comfortable with. Jesus says in Matthew 5 to love everyone, even your enemies. It is easy to love your friends and people who love you first, but even sinners do that. That does not distinguish you from anyone else in the world. This love that the world is supposed to know Christians by looks different from the love of the world.

Pastor Dave: And then making disciples is even harder because it requires us not only to show God's love to others, including strangers and people who are different from us, but to talk to them about Christ and invite them into a relationship of faith.

Several studies have been done on the growth of churches, or the lack of growth. Basically, they all say the same thing. Newer churches with younger pastors and an evangelical emphasis are growing. Larger churches that are already big are getting bigger. But this is not due to new people coming to the faith: other Christians are going to churches where there is more life and vitality in the congregation. Overall, the number and percentage of people in the United States who identify as Christian believers are declining all the time.

The Bible does not call us to steal disciples or borrow disciples or move disciples around. We are to *make* disciples! Make new ones! This requires us to build a trusting and authentic enough relationship with them to teach them about the faith and to encourage them to continue to grow.

Making disciples requires us to build trusting and authentic relationships with people who are not like us.

It also requires us to look at ourselves and to see how we are growing in our own faith. What are we showing to people when we invite them in? We cannot make disciples and expand the table of faith if we ourselves are not walking out the love of Christ consistently from day to day.

The bottom line is that churches are not growing because people without Christ are not connecting with unbelievers. We are not regularly sharing the love of Jesus with our neighbors, period. We don't talk to them about what God is doing in our lives. We don't share the miracles that happen to us and then give honor to God as we do so. We don't invite them to church at all, and we don't invite them...to dinner.

Nicole: Last week, we invited everyone to set an extra place at your family's dinner table. If you are like the Kirksey's, you don't often eat together as a family. We have three different schedules so we often grab food when we can. So as one non-dinner-table family to others, I want to double the challenge for some of you. If you don't usually have dinner together as a family, schedule at least one day this upcoming week when you plan to do so. And then, at the dinner table, set an extra place. Leave it empty. Allow that empty place to remind your family of neighbors, of people you know from other areas of your life, and even extended family members. Pray for them.