

A Journey Between Two Tables
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A Sermon for Sardis Baptist and Presbyterian Churches
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Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

There's a space, it's six feet in diameter, and it occupies a sacred place in my life. Geographically, it's not constant – this little circle has been all over North Carolina. As a matter of fact, it's resided in four different rooms in the last six and half years. But emotionally and spiritually, this little circle, well it's constant. It's life-giving. It's where I can be me.

It's my kitchen table.

And two-three times a day, my wife Jacqueline, and my daughter Mary Allen, and I gather round that little circle. It's where we can be us.

We offer prayers of thanksgiving, sometimes spoken, sometimes not. Sometimes, we're dressed to the nines, sometimes we're hardly dressed at all – pajama bottoms and wrinkled t-shirts in the morning, and cowlicks sprung-free from yesterday's hair gel; and if spaghetti's on the menu, it's just a bib for little Mary Allen. It's funny though, no matter how we look, no matter the time of day, we seek to offer a form of simple thanks. I suppose we pray like nobody's looking.

And that table is home to some pretty good gift-giving, too. A handful of Cheerios, or a little laugh, or a blown kiss won't buy you much at a department store. But they're all the currency you need in this space. Sometimes the gift is a listening ear, or a greeting card to mark a remembrance, or a sweet-smelling flower, or scrambled eggs done just right, or Eggs Benedict on special days, or just the affirming presence of people who know you and love you.

And I suppose there's fasting at our table, too, but that's a pretty loose term. Maybe Whole 30 counts? And some nights, though I sure do wish it was more, the table offers respite from tablets and talking screens. And if we are really lucky, the table offers a fast from all the commotion of a busy week.

Much like the tables in our homes, when we gather at God's table, we are freed to be ourselves, freed to pray like ourselves, freed to give like ourselves, freed to fast like ourselves, freed to identify treasures of real purpose and value, freed to be in God's presence as God intended.

Tonight's lection is a lesson in authentic piety and righteousness. And tonight marks the beginning of a season where we seek to live with a sense of authentic righteousness and piety, all in the hope of connecting with and coming closer to our Creator.

And I think all of that, our righteousness, our piety, our connection to God, our very being – I think it all starts and ends with a table.

Jesus left the wilderness, convinced of his calling, committed to a life wholly-centered in God.

Jesus met pious men. They wore long robes, and prayed prayers with three-syllable words, and gladly sat in places of honor. And as they prayed, they failed to notice God in their midst.

Jesus sat at a table, maybe it was a park bench lunch, and he gathered among friends. And he taught us, *Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done*. Pray like God's world is right now! And God was present.

Jesus met pious men. They taught their bodies to endure hardships – their agony, their pain, their sacrifice made evident in their postures and in their expressions. And yet God's presence was absent.

Jesus gathered round tables. But he didn't fast from food, nor did he busy himself with keeping proper company. Jesus fasted from unhealthy systems that put an emphasis on things rather than people. And his head was anointed, not with oil like you buy in the store, but with a glowing spirit found only in the commune of God's beloved. And God was present, even when other things were absent.

Jesus met pious men. They gave such good gifts: treasures that could build mansions and temples, and buy ornate things to fill such grandiose places, and serve as demonstrations of power and might, and sometimes loyalty, too. But God's spirit was absent in those gifts.

Jesus gathered at a table with friends. And he shared a simple meal. He said, here take and eat this bread, "It's my body, for you." And here, drink some of this wine, it's my life-force poured out for you." I'm giving you my whole self – it vulnerable, but it's also ME!!! And God was present. And God still is present there.

Over the next forty days, we'll commit ourselves, much like Jesus in the wilderness, and indeed Jesus in his professional ministry, and indeed Jesus at his many tables, to a life centered on God.

This table in front of us, tells us God is here. And this table will wait for us again on Maundy Thursday.

Lent is the journey between two tables. And here, I think, is its challenge: Whether you take on, or give up in the coming days, all in the pursuit of knowing God a little better, can you live that journey as if you are still seated at God's table. Can you imagine that the value you find in your seat there is strong enough, is big enough, is filled with enough grace, to let you be the same person at every table, in every conversation, in the midst of every encounter?

The ash reminds us of our frailty. But don't be scared. Dust or no dust, we are held in the hands of a mysterious, wonderful, creative, merciful, grace-filled, parental God, who invites us to a table where we can pray like ourselves, and give like ourselves, and fast like ourselves, and be ourselves.

Jesus said, "This do in remembrance of me."

Whatever you do, or don't do in this Lenten season, I hope you'll do it in the presence of God's table, in remembrance of the One we serve.

Bon Appetit, and Amen.