

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Come to the Table: Won't you Be My Neighbor

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Well, there you are and there I am. Some years in our personal lives are better than others. Some years in the life of a nation are better than others, and 50 years ago, this year, 1968 was not a great year in our nation, starting in January. In January of that year, there was a ship called the USS Pueblo an intelligence gathering, Navy ship, an intelligence gathering, Navy ship that was captured by the North Koreans. North Korea was in the news January the 28th. On January the 30th there was a change in the Vietnam conflict because the North Vietnamese attacked and the lunar New Year and it was called the Tet Offensive and the attack on a broad front and that became the turning point in the United States involvement, at least in the war in Vietnam. On March the 16th, Robert Kennedy decided that he would run for president. The challenge was that the person in the White House was a member of his own party, His name was Lyndon Johnson. On March 31st Lyndon Johnson went on television and said he would choose not to run. Four days later on April the fourth; Martin Luther King Junior was assassinated in Memphis. Three weeks later, the 23rd of April; it was April the 4th that he was assassinated. April 23rd, some students at Columbia University started a protest against the war that spread around the world and when it spread around the world, it started rocking the foundations of a lot of things. Six weeks later, Robert Kennedy having just won the California primary, at a hotel in southern California, was assassinated on his way out of the hotel in the kitchen. Two months after that at the Democratic National Convention, they had riots in Chicago at Grant Park. Seven weeks after that at the Mexico City Olympics two young black medalists stood up during the National Anthem and raise their fist skyward in protest. Seems like the only really positive thing that happened that year was that on, I think it was December 24th in the space race with Russia, the United States, Apollo eight orbited the moon 10 times and coming out on the far side of the moon the last time James Lovell, one of the astronauts, said, Houston be informed that there is a Santa Claus. Almost unnoticed in all of that in that year, something happened on February the 19th in a public television studio called WQED in Pittsburgh where a 40 year old Presbyterian minister and childhood educator, stepped onto a set, took off his sport coat, reached in and pulled out a sweater and put it on, sat down and took off his dress shoes and put on some tennis shoes and on that day the nation met a genius by the name of Fred McFeely Rogers. Fred McFeely Rogers created this program called Mr. Rogers' neighborhood for two to five year olds, but there was a tagline that said; "appropriate for all ages". He created the sets, he wrote the songs, and that program lasted 33 years. In a day when we think six year runs our big, 33 years. Fred Rogers brought us, brought little people into a set that had a regular world and a make believe world, and they were both real because when you're four years old, you don't know the difference between this world and that world, but in both worlds there was one value being stated over and over again, and it was that word, the value of one person. One single question kept bringing it into focus and we heard it in the song, "please won't you be my neighbor?" I got to tell you, I love this series. When I heard we were doing this series, I was excited and then when I heard the part that I got to do, which was number three, which is bringing them to the table, I'm saying, yes, food, my addiction. You know, we're all addicted to vary..., but I'm just telling I like it, it likes me and we're good.

And in Luke's Gospel, the story is told of Jesus on the Sabbath Day, healing a man. Now this is not, and I've said this a number of times over the years here, this is not baby Jesus, meek and mild. This is the Jesus who lays down tracks on the truth and he heals a man and then challenges the religious types and asks them, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? What do you think? And then they have a dinner together and he tells at the dinner, he tells two meal stories. So he's at a dinner, telling a story about a dinner, and then another story about a dinner. We've got dinner all over the place here. And when he finished the first story, one of the people said, that person will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous because he had said, when you invite people to dinner, invite people who can't repay you. And it's like Jesus was saying, let me talk to you about that dinner. Let me talk to you about the sort of the long term here.

And in Luke 14:15, this is how it reads.

¹⁵ *When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."*

¹⁶ *Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'*

¹⁸ *"But they all alike began to make excuses."*

Now in the little booklets that you got, it describes the context of this, that there are two invitations given and it's not save the date, if you read the little book, it's not save the date, it's you sent out a real live invitation and then the second invitation you actually go and you get the people and the escort them in. It's like sometimes at theaters when you go, they come around and they ring that ding dong thing and you're supposed to go in for the second act, it's that kind of thing,

¹⁸ *"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'*

¹⁹ *"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'*

²⁰ *"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'*

These are pathetic excuses, right? These are the like the wimpiest weakest kinds of excuses. You bought five oxen; you didn't check them out or what?

²¹ *"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'*

²² *"'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'*

²³ *“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. And then here’s the tagline.²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”*

The basic message of the parallel of the great banquet could be stated this way. He came to his own and his own rejected him, or conversely, the blessings of the kingdom are available to all who come to Christ by faith. When you read about the Gentiles in Hosea in the Old Testament, it says,

^{2:23} *I will say to those called ‘Not my people, ‘You are my people’;*

and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”

Jesus is saying, please won't you be my neighbor. Come to my territory, be in my house. The listeners to the story have to be saying what, where, when, why, who? Why the story of a meal here, he's sitting at a table. But when I think about it, sitting at a table around the world is what we humans do. Many of us are not great at some things. I confess, you know, I'm shallow in a lot of areas I'm not great at, but what I am great at, and I think most of you are great at it as food. The one thing that 7.6 billion people on this planet do in groups is to eat. That's what we do. It's necessary to life, it's vital for social connection. I think I'm right here that the word company comes from the, I think it's the French *compagnie*, or however you say that. And it means 'with bread'.

We have some great neighbors where we live in Fort Collins. She's from California and he's from Pittsburgh, huge Steelers fan in Bronco territory, puts up a Steelers thing out on his front porch every year. But when we first moved in, at one point Ruth was making some chocolate cupcakes and she said, Dick here's some extra. Take those to our neighbors, and I took them over and the next day Bill, who's Italian, walks over and he's made his homemade Biscotti. That's the stuff that you put in coffee and it helps everything. Eating is natural, it's rhythmic. They say armies march on their stomach. You can't win wars without great supply lines of food. And so when you read God's grand story in scriptures, it's full of lessons around food.

Listen to Genesis 1:29

²⁹ *Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.”*

Genesis 9:3,

³ *Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.”*

You read Adam and Eve; "you can have fruit from all the trees except one." They didn't work out.

Cain, Abel, sort of the original food fight, if you will. You've got Abraham who entertains visitors. You got Joseph in Egypt with his brothers and there's a famine and it's about food.

You've got Moses and the Israelites who when they're on the journey to the Promised Land, they're looking back at the food in Egypt, it says. Elijah gets worn out, God's man absolutely worn out. He's had a, you know, he does this thing on Mount Carmel. 1 Kings 19 where he takes out the prophets, you know, hundreds of prophets of Bale. He calls down fire from heaven; he had a great weekend from a pastoral perspective. Okay? And it says that Jezebel sends him this note, sends them a text, says you're dead meat. Says that he runs, and he runs into the desert by himself and he's awakened, and he said, you need food. You need to eat because the journey is too much for you. You say alright already. We get it, okay. Food, big in the scripture. But Jesus' first miracle was a wedding feast, which is the image of the feast at the end of time. You've got the feeding of the multitudes. You have Jesus describing himself in food language I am the bread of life in the iconic last supper painting. I was just in Italy with several grandchildren. We didn't go to Milan, but there's a painting of the last supper that doesn't hang, it's on a wall someplace and that that becomes iconic for the character of the kingdom. After the resurrection on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus sits at table and he broke the bread, they recognized him then. He shows up in the room, scares the bejeebers out of him, I think because he just showed up in the room and he wanted to prove he was human so he said, do you have any fish? And you boiled fish to eat by the Sea of Galilee with Peter.

And finally, Revelation 19:9. *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb!"*

The wedding feast; the end is a glorious celebration of all who are in Christ.

When we talk about being neighborly, when we talk about being neighbors, bringing people to our table is a profound thing. In the Middle East some of you are from there, some of you have been there and most of the world, the sharing of food is the place of beginnings. The sharing of food is the place of beginnings. I was in this town many years ago and I was talking to some folks from the Middle East and he said, you know, you guys come over here, you're going to work on treaties and all that kind of stuff and you just want to blow into town, sign the deal and go on. You don't get it. You've got to go and sit in the tent for two days and eat the goat and eat all that stuff. You have to find out about our families. You need to understand who we are before we signed something.

It's interesting the Charities Aid Foundation World Giving Index; says the nation with the highest ranking kindness to strangers is Iraq. In 2017, despite desperate living conditions, eight out of 10 Iraqis helped someone they didn't know during the last month of that year. Hospitality is a bedrock of cultures and perhaps the grandest expression is that part called food. Men, when you make me welcome, when you feel welcome, it makes your host feel proud. You say, well, I don't have any space in my... They say that even at a restaurant, if you're going to take somebody to a restaurant, go to the same one because you build a relationship with the restaurant people. There's a familial sense to what's going on.

In Jesus' story and often in that kind of hospitality, when you're invited to someone's house, the person who's invited is obligated to reciprocate, but in Jesus' story he's saying, invite people who can't. Invite people who can't invite you to their space because they don't have any space, they're living in a grate someplace or they're living in an alley or they're who knows where.

I'd just like to make this observation. When you're my age, you oftentimes hear the word old school, so old school. I just like to say that sharing your table is always with the times. Nobody says, oh, dinner, so old school. Nobody says that's nuts, so yeah, ya just don't say that. I have a feeling that God is saying, what image can I embed in my people so that generations will never forget my message or my heart. Can I say that again? I think God is saying, what image can I embed in these people who I've called by my name and they call me by my name, call themselves by my name. What image can I embed so that generations will never forget my message or my heart? Quite frankly, food is a gift from my person to yours. That's just how it is.

On Thanksgiving, when I was a kid in California, we would drive from Oakland, California to Dinuba, California, and I don't know of anybody in the sound of my voice or seeing me on the screen or here knows where a Dinuba, California is. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but you can come to me afterwards, we'll have a secret handshake. But the fact is that Dinuba is a little town south of Fresno, California and their big export over the years was raisins. My grandfather, all of his adult life for decades worked in a raisin packing plant, making crates for sending raisins around the world. But we'd go with Thanksgiving to their little house at 142 Golden Way in Dinuba, a town of 5,000 and I knew what was waiting. It was going to be homemade biscuits and what they called miners honey, and there would be in the refrigerator, freezer pineapple ice cream. That's where you mixed cream with crushed pineapple and you put it in ice cube trays, some of you older people know what that was. But you slide those trays in there and it was like heaven, it was just tremendous. It was a gift from my grandmother to me some years ago.

Ruth and I went to Darmstadt, Germany. Darmstadt Germany was known during the last war is the place where buzz bombs were made by Hitler. And in December of 1944, the allies bombed the town. 12,000 people died 70,000 left homeless in 20 minutes. There was a group of young teenage girls who felt that that was God's judgment on them for not standing up to Hitler in the face of the Holocaust. They didn't speak out. They felt and they said, if we ever get a chance, if we lived through this, we're going to come back here and we're going to create a place of peace and reconciliation. They did. They were evangelical Lutheran Sisterhood, called the Sisters of Mary in Darmstadt. And Ruth and I went there some years ago and we walked into that place and it was like the most peaceful place that I, you know, I just can't remember. It was just this wonderful place and they served this food and they grew the food in their gardens, and they did all of that and they had dug a well and it was the purest water you've ever tasted. And as this young sister poured the water into my glass that I tasted and I said, man that is tremendous water. And she just looked at me and smiled very sweetly and said, 'all of the heavenly father's water is good'. (spoken with a German accent) I said that's what I'm thinking.

The point is that when we think about food, it's visceral, no pun intended. That's just, it's just who we, who we are. It's what we're about. It's every day we think about it, how we get it, what we're fixing, where do we get it fast, do we do it slow? What do we..., how do we do that? And Jesus uses that as the focal point for helping people understand the nature of the Kingdom of God. One of my favorite writers teaches at the University of Alabama Journalism School he is Pulitzer Prize winning author by the name of Rick Bragg and Ruth, one day found in a thrift shop in Falls Church a book called 'All Over But the Shoutin', which is his book, about his

growing up years with a single mom and a dad that was in and out and was drunk and so forth. But this is what he wrote and, you know, it's not from the Bible, but I just love it. He says, the one great meal of the day was breakfast because breakfast is cheap. Every morning of my childhood, I woke up to the smell of biscuits, to the overpowering aroma and popping sound of frying fatback, which we called white meat. Some folks know what that is, which we call white meat. Mama fried eggs, laid by our own chickens and made gravy and grits. Sometimes there was nothing but biscuits and gravy made from yesterday's bacon grease, which I would take right now in place of just about anything I usually eat. If I was late for school, she'd shove a piece of fat back or bacon into a biscuit, I would eat it on the run. To this day, I dream not of beautiful women and wealth and power as often as I dream of sausage gravy over biscuits with a sliced tomato on the side and a small lake of real grits. Not that bland, pale watery restaurant stuff that I would not serve on death row, but, grits cooked with butter and plenty of salt and black pepper. Can I get an amen? I'm just saying, ya know.

When I smell food, it conjures up memories. I'm a kid just coming back from India with my parents in 1949 and we stayed in a home in the Bronx and there was a little store across the street and they let me go across the street at seven and a half years old every afternoon to get an orange popsicle and I would go and stick my head in the freezer and inhale the smell of orange popsicle. Can any of you remember what an orange popsicle and to this day. And I spent those years in India I walked down a condiment aisle in a supermarket, I go past curry and all of a sudden I'm back in South India. Could Peter ever eat fire roasted fish again in his entire existence without thinking of that morning on the beach when Jesus said, its okay, I haven't sent you away from the table. Come on, here we go. Let's do this. Let's get this done.

The fancy word for sitting at table is hospitality. Titus says it this way, or Paul says it this way to Titus; ^{1:7} *Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁸ Rather, he must be hospitable,*"

When I read that years ago, because that's guidelines for leadership in the church, if you will I'm saying, what is the hospitality that why do you put punch and cookies right in there with not a lover of money and not a philanderer? Well, what's that about? Well, it's not about punch and cookies, is it? It's about something much deeper than that. Hospitality by definition is one who has given to generous, welcoming and cordial reception of visitors, guests or strangers. But why would the New Testament say that? Well, the church didn't work otherwise because the church didn't meet here, it met in homes. I would submit that the day to day church at work still meets in homes. I would say that it meets in homes and in apartments and in condos and in favorite restaurants, and then when we sit at table in the spirit of Jesus, he's there. He loves coming to dinner. An invitation to the table says, step into my life. That's what it says. Step into my life. It's not just pot roast and potatoes, it's intimate. Here's the process. You've heard me say this before; I go, I give away my life for money. We call it work. I get money. We go buy food with the money. Then we prepare and arrange that food and when you invite me over to eat, it's not just roast or potatoes or chili relleno, it's not just injera or curry or lasagna, it's not just apple pie or tiramisu. That's my life you're ingesting. When I prepare food or go get food and bring it in and you come, we are sharing life. The table then becomes a platform for hearing and telling of stories.

Like Pastor Mark said last week. I love that part, Pastor Mark where you said we are 11 percent happier when you write down your testimony, so I started writing down my testimony, but I'm old, I got a cramp, no, I didn't. Here's the deal about story. When you hear someone else's story, it changes your narrative. When you hear someone else's story, it changes your narrative because it's not just a piece of information, just like the pot roast isn't just food; it's a slice of life that we share. An invitation like that is a recognition of value. All people are designed to have their value recognized and in our culture at a media driven pace, no one did it better than Fred McFeely Rogers.

One of the reviews of the film that some of you have seen is that we shall never see his kind again. One of his kind again, he didn't establish a four year old value. He recognized it. When you invite me to eat at your house for a burger, you're not establishing my value, maybe affirming it, you're recognizing it. You're letting me know that you know that I'm valuable. That's what you're doing. So when I sit or reclined at a table with Jesus, Jesus, in doing that, use someone's question to share a truth about the heart of his father. And the question was, so who does he value, this father that I can't see? And the answer is everybody. He's not willing that any should perish, the scriptures say. So for people who are narrow minded or in strait jackets in their brains, it was frustrating, people who tried to make judgments that only God has the right to make. God's already made a judgment. It's this; I've made you in my image. You have wandered away from my dream, but I'll come where you are to provide a way back to me and his name is Jesus. That's how he sees me.

So the story to those who reject the invitation of the table is hard this is hardball. He says, you're out, there in. That's what he says in this parable. Another way to say it is I gave you everything and you hoarded it. You didn't give it away; you didn't invite people to the table. So who then is invited? Well, the great unwashed, so I get in, the people who aren't ordinarily invited, so I get in. The unwanted, sometimes I don't even want myself, I get in. It's a freeze frame of heaven because sitting at table in scripture, not just in culture, is identity. Jesus goes to the cross in part because he sat at the wrong table with the wrong people and it couldn't be handled, if you will. And he said, well, let me handle it. Let me blow the ends out of this thing and make this big table and say, y'all come, you come, I'll provide the way and you come.

70 years ago in this town, there was a very popular church not far from here, it's down on New York Avenue. The pastor of that church was part-time Senate chaplain; they didn't have a full-time Senate chaplain at the time. His name was Dr Peter Marshall. Peter Marshall, among his pastoral colleagues, told Biblical newsreels. He told stories and his friends called him twittering birds Marshall, because of the way he framed stories. Because he would take, like I think Fred McFeely Rogers, he would take an idea and he would frame a what if around it or could it have looked like this around it? He was so popular that the crowds, the church couldn't contain the crowds they had to put loudspeakers out on New York Avenue and people would stand in the rain to listen to him preach. There was a compilation of some of his messages called Mr Jones Meet the Master. It's an old book. And in Mr. Jones Meet the Master, he tells the story of an invitation from Jesus and I'm not gonna read the whole message clearly, but let me just read the invitation. A wealthy man up on Massachusetts Avenue according to Peter Marshall, read that text in Luke and during the night he had trouble sleeping because he said what would happen if I, with all that, I have gave an invitation to people who didn't have anything, and so he went down

to the engraver the next day and he had this invitation engraved; Jesus of Nazareth requests the honor of your presence at a banquet honoring the sons of want. On Friday evening in a home on Massachusetts Avenue cars will await you at the Central Union Mission at 6:00. Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I'll give you rest. The engraving room didn't know what to make of it, but he went and he passed out all these cards and then at 6 on the appointed time, limousines pulled up and these guys who hadn't eaten a hot meal in days got in the backseat. A blind man asked, where are we going? A guy who had a gun in his pocket, who is thinking suicide, said, well, at least I'll have a meal. They got and they went up to his home and when you read the message, it tells the story of guys who hadn't laughed forever. And they laughed and then he sat at the big grand piano and they sang old songs and when he walked out, the blind man said, what did he look like? I'd just like to see what he looked like. And another man said, nobody's ever given me anything in my life except tonight sir and you gave me hope. There's something about going and finding one person. Jesus says when you do it to one of the least of these to one I show up, it is I that shows up.

I close with his story. Some years ago, I was in Romania and I may have told you this before, but I don't care. Some years ago I was in Romania with a government leader from here and before we left, the church leaders insisted we sit down because they wanted to tell us a couple of stories about the church, but one of the stories they told was about a young couple who were church planters that went up into Moldova, which is the part sort of north of Romania. And they were doing a church plant, but the institutional church that was there, they would have none of it. They waited until they got their home built and the wall up because you have sort of compounds, someplace they were going to have church. They waited till it was done and the day after it was done, there was a banging on the gate and the man went to the gate and here's stood four or five burly, big old guys saying are here to tear down your house. He said, please come, come in. They came in, they climbed up on the roof and they started throwing the tiles off onto the ground or whatever the roofing material was. They were throwing it down and they worked all morning and it was hot and dusty and they were working hard and about noon the man came out and said, gentlemen, my wife has prepared some soup and some cheeses and some meats, whatever, and would please come and eat. And they're saying what? He said, please, you've worked hard doing a good job tearing the roof, you know, just come down. The guys came down very wary. Could be poisoned soup, you know, we don't know. They walked in, they sat down and as they ate they said, why are you doing this? He said, well, you know, some people say we should be enemies, but we follow Jesus and he doesn't see you as enemies. He sees you as friends and we just wanted to be your friends. Thank you for sitting at our table. When they were done, they got up and they went out and they climbed back up on the roof and they started putting the roof back on, all those pieces and when they had their first little service, those guys were the first people there.

This is how Jesus says it in Revelation 3:20. I love him in part because he just invites himself over. ²⁰ *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, I'll eat with that person, and they with me.*"

And I'm saying, what's that about? He doesn't come and say, I'll come in and transform the way you think. He doesn't come in and say, I'll just get it so your attitude is better. He says, I'll come in and I'll eat with you because when you eat with somebody over time, it's the platform for almost everything else good that can happen. When Jesus comes to my table, he turns around and

invites me to his. My question is, who will I invite to mine? Who will you invite to yours? There may be somebody that you see, you see him pretty much every day, you know, it's the guy down on the corner with a sign or whatever. I mean, what would happen? I don't know what would happen, but if I were a betting man, I would bet you \$100 that it'd be good for somebody, might be good for him, but absolutely it'd be good for you and good for me because Jesus gave this as an instruction. He gave this as a directive because he says, that's what my kingdom is about. It's about that kind of life sharing. It's the ingesting of my life. Food is not just a temporal thing. Food in the hands of a believer becomes an eternal thing in some way. So quite simply, an invitation to your table can become the hope of glory.

Father, thank you for your grace. Thank you for taking something so natural, so every day so ordinary, and just telling us this is the doorway to extraordinary. This is a doorway to the supernatural. Thank you Lord for showing us that and for showing us yourself. We love you. We're going to go eat. In Jesus' name. Amen.