

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

March 29, 2020

The Way of the Table

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Hey NCC'ers it's so good to connect with you this weekend. We've been thinking about you and praying for you and I've even had the opportunity to share a meal with some of you online. Now we want to stay connected during this season it might be a time of being physically distanced but that doesn't mean we have to be socially distanced. So whether you're tuning in for the first time, or you're a longtime NCC'er who just wants to be more connected during this season, would you take a minute and go to [NCC.re/connect](https://ncc.re/connect), and we'll help you find a place to belong.

This weekend we continue 'The Jesus Way' series with the 'Way of the Table', which feels both strange and timely all at once. I want to give you a heads up at the end of our service today we're going to be celebrating communion together. So let me encourage you to go gather some elements right now whatever you've got in your house. Get some crackers, or bread or even goldfish works right now. And then grab something to drink. If you've got grape juice, that's awesome, most of us don't, that's okay. Just grab juice or Kool Aid. Hey, grab a glass of water maybe Jesus will show up and do another miracle today. The point isn't necessarily the accuracy of the elements but the ability for us to experience that meal together.

There have been so many meaningful table moments in my life. Every time I see fun size candy bars, I think of my Grand's table, because a dish of fun sized candy stayed on that table 24/7. It was the place we're friends and family gathered every holiday. And then any average week day could be turned into a holiday simply because of my Grand's tremendous hospitality. There was something about that table that represented welcome, and belonging. And then every time I see a Rice Krispie treat, I'm immediately transported to the Fisher House in West Mobile, because I can't remember ever being there a single time that there wasn't a pan of fresh Rice Krispie treats on the table. Their table represented community and friendship and fun. And then anytime I see textbooks or lab equipment, I immediately think of my parents' house growing up. It's the place where I learned to color inside the lines and how to balance a checkbook. It's where my mom practice spelling words with me. It's where science projects were launched, research papers were written, college applications were completed. It's where we shared Saturday morning pancakes and birthday cakes and Friday night TV dinners. It's like this treasure trove of memories. That table represents identity. It was the becoming of me, and the preparing for who God had created me to be.

And I believe that the table is one of the most ubiquitous and yet overlooked settings in the Scripture. In the Old Testament, it's where God met with Abraham and promised he would be the father of a great nation. It's where the people of God celebrated their freedom at Passover every year, it's where the

prophets Elijah and Elisha did miracles of multiplications providing in times of need. The Psalmist even said that God would prepare a table for us in the presence of our enemies. Throughout the Old Testament, the table becomes a symbol of God's grace and provision and power and presence. Now, if you've got your Bibles with you this weekend, go ahead and turn over to Matthew nine. As we turn to the pages of the New Testament we find Jesus at the center of feasts and parties. And in fact some of his opponents criticized him and his disciples for being gluttons and drunkards. The table was the setting for some of the most powerful and pivotal moments of the life of Jesus. It's where he spent time with tax collectors and zealots, Pharisees and prostitutes, wealthy women, influential men. It was at the table with Jesus that the powerful were confronted, the oppressed were uplifted, the outcasts were invited, and the self righteous were ridiculed. It's where seekers were given a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

Now in this book would call the Bible we find books that were written by people who actually knew Jesus, real people that were living in a real time in a real place, experiencing real circumstances. People who sat at real tables with him, like Matthew, a guy who was considered a traitor to his people as a tax collector, for the Roman government, and therefore an outcast. But he gives us a biographical account and third person of Jesus sitting at his table.

Let's read in Matthew nine, verse 10. *"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>12</sup>On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup>But go and learn what this means: (and then he inserted a quote from Hosea 6:6), 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I've not come to call the righteous but sinners."*

At the table with Matthew Jesus showed us the way of inclusion; that every person belongs that it doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, Jesus has set a place for you at his table. You belong. And as the followers of Jesus, how do we turn our tables into places of belonging into places where people can experience the family of God?

Let's look at another one, if you flip over a few pages, to Matthew 14. Later in Jesus ministry, he's teaching along the Sea of Galilee and there were 5,000 hungry people there. Jesus disciples brought him two fish and five loaves. And Matthew again records Jesus saying in verse 18, *"Bring them here." And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people."* Jesus turned two fish and five loaves of bread into a feast for 5,000 with enough leftovers for every disciple to have a take home basket. Now at this picnic table, Jesus showed the way of power and provision.

Last weekend our campus pastors encouraged us that we do not need to worry. The Father knows your needs. He cares about you, and he wants to meet those needs. And sometimes, like in this passage in ways that are unmistakably, and undeniably by his power alone. Pastor Mark has said before that all of us want to see a miracle, but very few of us want to be in a position that necessitates one. Right now many of us are in a position that requires a miracle. For you, it might be a financial miracle as you're not able to work in this season. It might be a healing that is needed in a relationship with family members. As you ride out this time in greater proximity at home. It might be a physical healing in your body. Look, it might be parents and kids just trying to do life, work in school together. God sees you. He knows you. He loves you. And his power and provision are as available to you at his table as it was 2,000 years ago.

I also want to point out this pattern that we see in this passage of blessing, of giving thanks, breaking and giving because it's a pattern that Jesus repeats, again in the feeding of the 4,000 and in some of the other stories that we'll look at. Go on and turn over to Luke 24. Now this story comes right after the crucifixion. And some of the disciples have reported the body is missing, others claim that they have seen him in person. And it's a time of just general chaos and confusion. And in Luke 24, we meet two people walking along the road to Emmaus and there they run into Jesus, but they don't recognize him as Jesus. And then Jesus feigns ignorance of their topic of discussion, which is this news from Jerusalem that the young Jewish rabbi from Nazareth, that some believe to be the Messiah had been crucified by the Roman government, and now his body was missing, or maybe he had been seen. Now, Luke tells us that Jesus then gave them a teaching in Old Testament history, and theology. He walked through the writings of Moses and the prophets to reveal what they had said about him. I mean, can you imagine anything more amazing than to listen to Jesus himself, talk about how the Old Testament pointed to him. But even after a logical reason, sermon from Jesus himself on who he was, they still didn't recognize him because Jesus chose to reveal himself to them in a very different way. Later that night, they sat around a table to eat dinner.

And let's read in Luke 24, verse 30, *"When he (Jesus) was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it (we see that pattern again) and began to give it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him,"*

On the road, they received reason, at the table, they got revelation. On the road, they heard a lecture and at the table they saw life. It was sitting at a table with Jesus that they experienced the presence of Jesus. But we weren't created for distance but for proximity. We were created for community and connection. And can I encourage you in this season, to seek and enjoy community with Jesus? Now, I'm not going to give you a formula for doing that it's going to look different for each of us. But maybe it's just coming to the table with your Bible, turning to the words of Jesus, and letting him speak to you and show up for you.

Alright, let's turn over to John 21. This is after the resurrection, that disciples have gone out fishing, and they caught nothing all night. Early the next morning, Jesus appears on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and tells them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat, and they pulled out a record number of fish. Now that would have sparked a memory in the mind of Peter because Jesus had performed a very similar miracle three years earlier.

Now in John 21, verse nine, it says, <sup>9</sup> *When they (the disciples) had landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.* <sup>10</sup> *Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have caught."* <sup>11</sup> *So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.* <sup>12</sup> *Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."*

Jesus cooked breakfast for the disciples. Now look, this might seem like a small anecdotal detail, but I want to, I want to point out this fire of burning coals that we read in verse nine because there's only one other place in the New Testament that we find this particular word configuration, it's in John 18:18, just a few chapters earlier. And in that moment, it's the place where there's a fire burning in the courtyard of the high priest, where Peter was warming himself when he denied Jesus. I believe John is very intentional about this. When Peter approached Jesus on the beach, did the smell of that fire immediately transport him back to the courtyard of the high priest? Was it a visceral reminder of the denial? Did it awaken feelings of shame and failure, and disappointment? But then Jesus rewrites the story. Three times, Jesus asked Peter, do you love me, and then directed Peter, feed my sheep. He echoed each one of those denial moments with the commission of purpose. The smell of the burning coal fire would no longer bring back memories of failure and disappointment, but memories of grace. Reminders that he was still part of the family, and he still had a purpose to fulfill. Perhaps we see this most clearly at the table of communion.

Now, turn back to Matthew 26. It's the table moment that Jesus instructed his followers to continue to observe. And the church has observed it now for more than 2,000 years. Let me give some background. Every year Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples. The Passover was a celebration of God delivering his people from slavery hundreds of years earlier. I mean, it was basically their version of a fourth of July celebration. Moses told the people to sacrifice a lamb and spread the blood over the doorposts of their home, so that the final plague would pass over them. That night in Egypt God met his people at the table. He met them with his power to liberate, his presence to reconcile, to establish that they were his people, that they were his people and he was their God. It was to write a new chapter in their story. And so the people of God came together at the table every year to remember that night, the night that their bondage was broken that their freedom was bought, that their exile was ended. As my Jewish friend Ilan describes it, the Passover can be summed up like this: something wanted to destroy us, God intervened, let's party.

And so on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus sat at the table with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. But on that night, he infused it with new meaning. It says <sup>26</sup> *While they were eating, Jesus*

*took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." 27 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

N. T. Wright said that when Jesus wanted to explain to His disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory. He gave them a meal. He met them at the table, and then he followed the same pattern that we've seen before, he blessed it. Communion is a time to remember life, the life, the teachings, the death, the resurrection of Jesus, to remember what Jesus has done in our lives, and to give thanks. In fact, in some Christian traditions, the observance of the Lord's Supper or Communion is called the Eucharist which means to give thanks.

And then Jesus broke the bread. The breaking of bread is a time for examination. It's a time for confession. It's a time to make sure that the body of Christ as in the community; the people around us are doing okay. Now sometimes we have a tendency to turn this communion thing into a hyper individualized experience, about it being between us and God, but it wasn't meant to be done individually. It was meant to be done communally, together. In fact, in First Corinthians when Paul encourages that we examine ourselves, he's not talking about some sort of navel gazing or self examination. Look, it's another message for another time, but in context, Paul is saying, "Look around you. Is everybody doing okay? Is everybody able to participate? Does anybody feel like they can't belong? Is everybody bringing their full selves to the table, and is everyone making room for other people? It's not just about taking a moment to confess vertically to God but to confess to one another. It's at the table with Jesus, where the community of faith in the presence of Jesus should be able to confess to one another, to be real with one another to love and to serve one another.

And then Jesus gave it, he poured it out. It's where we remember that the kingdom is here, and is to come. And we sign up once again to be a part of it. And anticipate what God is going to do. Followers of Jesus have been celebrating that table moment for 2,000 years through persecution through plague from gatherings in simple First Century homes, to the ornate altars of medieval cathedrals, from the underground church in the east to the mega church in the West, from the mystics and the monastics to the reformers, and the revivalists. It's at the table that we ground ourselves in our common faith, where we're united as one in Jesus. The way of the table is the way of tension. It's the place where we live the both/and of our faith. It's the place where lament and celebration converge. Because it's the place where Jesus was broken, but we were made whole, where Jesus life was lost so that ours could be found. The table is where we experience inclusion in the family of God. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, what you've done, you belong. And the table is where we experience the power and provision of God, the power of resurrection that we've been brought from death to life that we can move from isolation to community. The table is where we best experience the presence of Jesus. And the table is where we find that our story has been re written. We've been invited to play a role in praying and bringing his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

