

"A Table for All"

"All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!"

There were many fine restaurants from which to choose during my internship year at Bethel Lutheran Church in Jamestown, New York; but there was one restaurant that was off-limits to the public. The Town Club was a private dining club where the tables were restricted to members and their guests; it was so exclusive that there wasn't even a sign on the door, because it was assumed that members knew where the club was located. I was a guest at the Town Club on one occasion; and while it was a very nice meal, it felt strange dining in an establishment where access was restricted to only a select few individuals.

I've had other experiences where access to dinner tables was restricted to only a chosen few. At my university, the President's Dining Room in Wismer Hall was very different from the dining hall where students took their meals; not only was the food vastly superior, but the room felt more like an exclusive club than a university food establishment. In my hometown, the Plainfield Country Club had a reputation for being "restricted," which in those days meant that it barred certain groups of people – including Jews and African Americans – from membership (the movie *Gentlemen's Agreement* deals with this dark chapter in American history). In numerous communities, diners who wish to eat at their favorite restaurant are often disappointed when they are confronted with a sign on the door announcing that the restaurant is closed that day for a "private affair." In many circumstances, people are restricted or denied access to places of gathering, turned away from tables that have been reserved for a select few individuals.

The Word of the Lord that is proclaimed in today's first lesson was first announced to the people of Israel who were in exile in Babylon. It was a period of grace crisis for the Jewish people; not only had they lost their homes and their freedom, but they even questioned whether God was still present among them or if God even heard their prayers of lament. It was a time in which "*out of the depths*" the descendants of Abraham cried out "*Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*" (Psalm 130:1-2). In this period of deep despair, God answers the people's cries through the prophet Isaiah, who proclaims to the Babylonians exiles a word of comfort and reassurance:

- "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins ... See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." – Isaiah 40:1-2, 10-11.

This section of Isaiah (sometimes referred to as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah) is filled with a message of hope for the exiled people of Israel, assuring them that they will be delivered from exile and restored to their homeland, the land of the covenant that God had established with their ancestors. These words of hope conclude with the announcement of the feast of God's abundance; only instead of being restricted to a select group of people, this feast is not restricted or limited but is a feast for all people:

- “All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat! Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk ... Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts. Listen and come to me; listen, and you will live.” – Isaiah 55:1-3.

No longer will the doors be closed and the table restricted; instead, the doors are flung wide open and the announcement that supper is ready is proclaimed among all peoples. Everyone is called to hear the Word of the Lord and to gather for the feast that the Lord will prepare for all people, the feast at which God will feed the people with the word that is life. It is the good news of the “everlasting covenant” with the people who will be liberated from the Babylonian exile so that they may be “*a witness to the peoples ... you shall call nations that you do not know.*” (55:4-5). God’s call is for *all* nations and peoples to “*return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*” (55:7). God chooses to be “*generous with forgiveness,*” which is at the heart of God’s steadfast love that may not be what the people would choose or desire; but the one who calls all people to come to the table is the one whose ways are not necessary those of the people – God’s Will and the will of the people may be vastly different:

- “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” – 55:8-9.

My experience of dining at the exclusive Town Club was freshly on my mind when I returned to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia for my fourth year, which including participating in our annual Advent Vespers service at a local Episcopal Church (our seminary chapel was too small for this event). When we gathered at Grace Church for choir rehearsal, I saw something that seemed very strange: an ornately carved wooden screen that separated the chancel from the nave, making it difficult for the congregation in the pews to see the altar and the worship leaders. Our choir director informed us that this was a Rood Screen, which was used in many churches to separate the clergy from the laity, restricting access to the altar and the Lord’s Supper to those who were deemed “worthy” to receive the Sacrament of the Altar. Rood screens are seldom built in more modern churches (and this congregation had an open communion policy that welcomed all people to receive Holy Communion), but its presence reminded us that there are still barriers and restrictions that churches often construct that limit access to God’s presence, God’s Word, and the blessings of the Lord’s Supper, even though our Lord proclaimed that it is “*the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.*” We may no longer build physical rood screens – but what barriers are we constructing to deny people access to the blessings of the Lord’s Table that God intends for all people?

In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches us that the Sacrament of the Altar is “*the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.*” Every time we gather at the Lord’s Table, we hear the words through which Jesus instituted this holy sacrament “*in the night in which he was betrayed,*” when at the Passover Seder that would be his last supper with his disciples he took the bread and wine and proclaimed that “*this is my body, given for you ... this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.*” The commandment of our Lord to “*do this in remembrance of me*” is one of the elements that make this meal a sacrament, a means of grace through which God blesses us with the meal that offers both strength for today as well as “*a foretaste of the feast to come.*”

- “The effect of the Lord’s Supper, like that of the sacraments generally, is that faith or its equivalent, the new life, is strengthened and increased constantly. Faith needs this ‘re-creation’ and ‘strengthening’ because in this life it is constantly attacked and endangered by the devil and the world. Thus, the Lord’s Supper is of help particularly when temptation attacks.” – Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*.

One of the questions that Luther asks in the *Catechism* (which is a book of questions and answers; “catechism” comes from the root words “kata – echo,” meaning “to answer back”) is “Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?” Who is worthy to come to the Lord’s Table – and conversely, who is unworthy? Who should be allowed entrance, and who should be denied a place at the table? Who should be fed, and who should be denied this meal? Luther’s answer is centered in one’s faith that the words of Christ are truly for us and for all people; all who believe are to be welcomed at the Lord’s Supper:

- “Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin,’ is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words ‘for you’ require truly believing hearts.”

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther quotes St. Hilary, a fourth-century French saint, who stated that “unless a person has committed such a sin that he has to be expelled from the congregation and has forfeited the name of Christian, he should not exclude himself from the sacrament.” (*Book of Concord* 473.59). It is on the basis of these teachings that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada extends “eucharistic hospitality” in welcoming all God’s people to our celebrations of Holy Communion whenever and wherever we gather at the table of the Lord:

- “The Lord’s Supper is God’s meal for the baptized. Admission to the Supper is by Christ’s invitation, offered through the church to the baptized.” – ELCIC Statement on Sacramental Practices.

While our church seeks to remove all physical and theological “rood screens” that have formerly denied people access to the Lord’s Supper, we need to be aware of other barriers and restrictions that keep people away from God’s presence or communicate a message that they are not welcome in the presence of the Lord. Our work to make our building more accessible is not merely a response to provincial laws or overcoming physical obstacles; it is for the sake of making this space accessible so that all people might have access to the Word of God that is proclaimed to us whenever we gather in worship. Our efforts to make our worship services inviting to all is not simply because we like to hear new music and be open to new ways of worshiping; it is for the sake of welcoming persons who once did not feel welcome or comfortable in worship to “come and see” what God is doing in our midst. Our commitment to living as a congregation in accordance with the mission and purpose to which God has called us – “to celebrate God’s presence among us and share God’s love … [to] affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour [and] affirm that everyone is acceptable to God – he is Lord of all” – is rooted in our commitment to being faithful to God’s Will that the Church of Jesus Christ be a place where all are welcome, where the message of grace is offered fully and freely to everyone:

- “I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It

means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family.” – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

I enjoyed my meal at the Town Club, but I was also aware that if I showed up at the door by myself, I would not be welcomed to take my place at those restricted tables. I have encountered other closed doors and “rood screens” that have kept me out of places where those inside didn’t think that I belonged, including churches where it was very clear that I was not welcomed in that place. Frankly, I didn’t care about the door of the Town Club being closed for me, since there were many other places in Jamestown where I was welcome to dine; it didn’t even bother me when I was not welcomed in some churches, because I know that there are other churches where I would be welcomed both to worship and receive the Lord’s Supper. But I *do* care about the church where I serve, the church that I have been called to live faithfully as an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament. My call is to proclaim God’s Word to all people, to offer the sacraments to all who believe and desire to partake in these means of grace, to remove all “rood screens,” barriers, and restrictions that would keep people away from the blessings of the Lord. In the church where God has called us to “*return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive*” (Joel 2:13), we must make certain that there are no screens, no restrictions, and no reservations. The Church is God’s house for all people, and the table in God’s house is a table for all.

- “Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions: all are welcome in this place.” – Marty Haugen.

Amen.