



Thou Preparest a Table

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Psalm 23

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For several years I have been working on a research project about women in urban ministry. The process I used to conduct the research is photo elicitation interviewing. I asked women who were urban ministers to take a couple of dozen photos of their work. The photos could depict symbols or activities. They could depict places or processes. The women had the freedom to determine what they would photograph. Once they had taken the pictures, I had them developed, and then we met face-to-face, and used the photos as prompts to talk about their work and their ministry. It was a very interesting project.

About six interviews into the project, I began to notice something that I later documented more accurately. In all the photos I had, which by then were a couple hundred, the single most photographed object was a table. Tables were everywhere in these photos. People were doing Bible study around tables. They were eating. They were having meetings. They were doing craft projects. They were doing community organizing. They were feeding patrons at a soup kitchen. They were eating dinner and celebrating holidays with their family or friends.

People were also worshipping at tables. Tables functioned as makeshift altars in some of the photos, and, of course, tables were real altars or communion tables.

When I began this project, I expected to see much different and more contemporary technology: lots of computers and phones. But, no. Instead I saw tables, simple items of furniture that have been around for thousands of years. Looking at all those tables, I came to appreciate how fundamental the process of gathering around a table is to the work of ministry, the building of human community, and the strengthening of family life.

We are entering a week of tabling. Many of us will gather later this week around tables with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving, to enjoy each other, and to deepen our relationships.

I confess that, even though I know better, I harbor sentimental and romantic notions of how my Thanksgiving will be. In my mind, my Thanksgiving table will look like Norman Rockwell's. The turkey will be perfectly cooked; the side dishes will be ample and delicious; the dessert pies will be baked to perfection, with crispy, golden crusts. I will get out my grandmother's china and the good glassware. I'll buy fresh candles and flowers. And, of course, the people seated around the dinner table will be cooperative and happy and engaged in lively conversation. In my imagination, this will happen seamlessly. It's going to be a great day. Every Thanksgiving, I cannot help but channel this dream.

I have equally sentimental and romantic notions about other family meals. As a kid, I used to love Friday nights especially. In my memory, it is a time when my mom would warm up Campbell's

Tomato Soup and make grilled cheese sandwiches. She probably only did that once, but that's my Friday night image. I would be tucked in for the weekend, and it was great. I felt warm and safe and well-loved. Comfort food will do that.

Several years ago, I read an article in which people were lamenting the change in family lifestyles, particularly those changes which have happened around shared meals. The article noted that, while once we could assume that most families sat down to dinner together, if not also to breakfast and lunch, we can no longer make that assumption. For many families, a shared meal is an exception. Family members come and go at different times of day; they have different tastes in food; they eat on the run. Wasn't that sad, the article suggested.

One person interviewed refused to be sucked in by the sentimentality. She offered another very real experience of shared family meals, asking, "Remember what family meals were really like?"

Despite the air-brushed fantasies I harbor about family and holiday meals, and my memory of a few really good ones, I actually do remember what family meals were really like. What I remember most vividly are arguments with my sister, tension between my parents, being yelled at for playing with my food, and playing with my food maybe just so I could be yelled at. Family meals in my family had their share of conflict and boredom.

We had to be very careful at Thanksgiving last year. My sister and her husband came to be with us. Politics was off the table for Thanksgiving dinner conversation. Nonetheless the evening before my sister gave me a little mini-lecture on why it was such a good thing that Hilary Clinton lost the election, and what a disaster it might have been had she won. She failed to change my mind, and we have not spoken of it since.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies" might be a little overly dramatic as a description of my Thanksgiving meals or everyday family suppers, and it might be overly dramatic for yours, too. But it is not too much to say that there are times when table fellowship can be awkward, and full of conflict, and sometimes even destructive. In the cultural moment in which we find ourselves now—when there is so much rancor and rudeness, and people are so quick to take or give offense—table fellowship can be especially tricky.

And yet we go back to the table, again and again. I go back to my family table in spite of my worst experiences, and I intend to keep doing it. We have all sat at table with colleagues we dislike, or parents who are not speaking, or people we do not trust. We keep coming back to the table, in families, with friends, at work, and at church. Sometimes we return to a table because we don't feel we have much choice; we have made commitments that we are going to keep. Other times we come to a table with hope, remembering deep in our hearts that the shared activity of the table – whether Bible study or eating or worshiping or committee deliberations – is a process that somehow knits us together. But we also come to the table because God invites us.

"Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of my enemies." There are many ways to interpret this line of poetry. What I hear the psalmist suggesting is that God invites us to the work

of reconciliation, the work of rebuilding broken relationships and fractured communities. That is not easy work.

It is far too easy to take reconciliation lightly. Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K., and others apologize for sexual misconduct, and maybe take themselves off to swanky rehabilitation programs at resorts none of the rest of us could afford, and hope their well-worded apologies and their time away will be the end of it. It's not.

It is easy to take reconciliation lightly. White Christians have made token efforts at racial reconciliation by befriending African Americans and beginning to wrap our heads around dynamics of racism; we hope this modest progress on our part will be enough. It's not. Allan Boesak and Curtiss DeYoung suggest that Christians who hold power are pretty adept at avoiding racial reconciliation in a radical sense. We settle for quick solutions that keep the status quo in place, or we turn a deaf ear to the victims of injustice and oppression.¹ It is easy to let ourselves off lightly.

When God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies, God is not inviting us to let ourselves off lightly. God is inviting us to rebuild the world. That sounds like uphill work, and it is, but it's not only work. Look where God and the psalmist put this invitation: in the middle of this beautiful psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

Years ago, when I was working on this psalm I discovered that the line I just quoted is actually not a very good translation. "Stalk" might be a better translation than "follow," or maybe "pursue." Goodness and mercy are not trailing along behind us in this text, like Mary's little lamb. Quite the contrary. God is coming after us. God is coming after you and me, armed with goodness and mercy, with steadfast love. God wants nothing more than to fill your life and mine with goodness.

God's eagerness and determination to share goodness are what this psalm is all about. God shares divine goodness by leading us to safe spaces, toward nourishment and refreshment, along paths of righteousness, and through tight spots. God fills our cup to overflowing. God anoints our head with oil, reminding each and every one of us of how special we are.

In the midst of all this goodness, God calls us to the work of reconciliation. Because this invitation is embedded in this song of mercy, I have to conclude that reconciliation work is part of the blessing of which the psalmist speaks. Giving us the work of reconciliation is another way in which God fills our life with goodness; it's another area of our life in which we meet God. The one who does not abandon us in the valley of the shadow of death does not abandon us at the table, either. God is with us. God is, in fact, our host.

¹ Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung. *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

When you next gather around a table, whether it's a table of joy and plenty, a table of awkwardness, or maybe even a table of dispute, may you find remember this psalm. As you remember, may you find yourself right in the middle of God's goodness. May you feel God's presence. May you be surrounded by the mystery and beauty of God's grace. Amen.