

TURNING THE TABLE
Preached by
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For Reflection: *"It is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings."*

Henri

Nouwen

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 33 (*Psalms Now*)

God is here -- let's celebrate!
With song and with dance,
 with stringed instruments and brass,
 with cymbals and drums,
 let us express ecstatic joy in God's presence.
Let us celebrate with the old songs of praise,
Let us also create new songs
 that portray the eternal love of our God.
God did create this world,
and continues to permeate it with love.
Even among its frustrated and unbelieving children,
 God constantly carries out his purposes.
God's plan for the world and its inhabitants
 are not obliterated by the foolishness of humans.
God's truth is not blotted out by the lethargy or lies
 of apathetic creatures.
God continues to reign and reveal Godself to us.
And God continues to create and to renew
 the world about us.
The Lord does this through those who relate to God,
 who rely on God's ever-present love.
God delivers God's children from the fear of death
 and through them gives life to the world.
God's love is sure and everlasting.
Hearts open to God's love are filled with joy.
They truly find cause for celebration.

Reading from the Gospel: Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.
And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no

need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

TURNING THE TABLE

At a wedding reception, I was seated next to an old friend who was planning her own daughter's wedding. Suspecting that I probably attend an above average number of weddings, she asked, what, in my opinion, was the most important thing in planning a good wedding. Without hesitation, I said, "The seating chart."

My response was borne of the observation that when guests look back on a wedding, while colored by a moving service, the food, the flowers and the loveliness of the bride, their memories are most influenced by how badly they wanted to move their place cards to another table.

The hosts' attention paid to the seating chart is a reflection of the attention paid to their guests. Hosts who take the trouble to know their guests' connections and interests and seat them accordingly are not being tedious, picky or status conscious. They are saying to each and every person present, "We are delighted that you are here. It wouldn't be the same without you. Our joy is enhanced by your enjoyment." When we think back on those occasions, when we were seated well—in other words, with dinner companions with whom, whether friends or strangers, we found something in common, my guess is that those are also the events where our hosts acknowledged distance traveled, challenges to convenience or schedule, the compassionate mention of a recent loss in the guest's family. To each one, they speak of details which say we aren't lost in a crowd of well-wishers, but are valued persons. On all such occasions, the seating chart is not the beginning, but the end of thousands of gracious acts of hospitality by those who have brought the group together.

Hosts can only be responsible for and in control of so much. The best planning and most careful design cannot prevent someone from drinking too much, not feeling well, arguing with their spouse on the way to the party, being intentionally or unintentionally insulting, or simply refusing to make an effort. However, once the hosts have done their part, guests are obliged to continue in the established pattern of hospitality to one another.

Other than in diplomatic circles, there is a practice that has fallen out of use. Gracious hostesses were once recognized and admired for their skill at "turning the table," referring to the practice of leading guests in changing their conversational partners. For the first portion of the evening, guests would speak to guests seated on one side. When the hostess sensed the timing was right, that her guests were comfortable, and had reached a breaking point in their current conversation, she would draw her own to a close, and begin conversation with the guest seated at her other side. Guests would follow suit, thus "turning the table." Guests followed the lead of their hostess, whether or not they were finished their conversation, whether or not they liked the person on one side better than the other, whether or not they liked them at all. Miss Manners awarded bonus points to those most gracious of guests who, secured in their own welcome by their hosts, enhanced the hospitality by "seeking out guests who seem momentarily isolated," and "stranded members of the hosts' family who are not of the same generation as the other guests."

While I would not encourage a return to renewed formality, I do believe the old custom of "turning the table" is one we might revitalize to good purpose. It was a modified version of "turning the table" Jesus was practicing, when he called Matthew, the tax collector to follow him, or when at dinner with those who raised Pharisean eyebrows. Jesus reached out to those who were momentarily isolated or the ones whose circumstances, choices and condition separated them from the community for longer periods of time. Secure in his own role and place in the community of faith, Jesus extended the hospitality of God to others. A gracious (original meaning of "gracious" was "godly") godly turning of the table.

Is that a gracious godly model we can imitate? On each day of our lives of faith, we are honored guests gathered in this place for our host's joy and our own. Like Matthew and all the others, we too have been individually selected and invited by name. This is not tweeted, Facebooked or emailed "y'all come."

We each completed our individual place cards, reminding ourselves that we are welcomed, expected and planned for guests at this meal. Of course, place cards remind us of seating charts. While there is the informal seating chart of habit, there is no chart on the wall outside the sanctuary assigning us a pew. If there is anything that produces more anxiety than a seating chart, it is the absence of one. We wonder if we are really welcome. Will we be able to find someone to talk to? Will we wind up sitting alone? Are we the only ones who don't know anyone else here? Is there some protocol of which we are not aware?

Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." We have a place here. We are welcome. Confident of our welcome by our host, we can let the rest of our anxieties fade, for all that is asked of us now, is that we come willing to participate in what the host has planned. What might that be? "Accept one another, then, for the glory of God, as Christ has accepted you." How might we turn the table for someone else, as it has already been turned for us?

If someone should sit in the place we had chosen for ourselves, we don't ask them to move or even complain loudly in their hearing—a no-brainer, a form of welcome we already extend. Seating ourselves next to that stranger though may be another less common act. It would, none-the-less, be turning the table.

There is a church in urban Boston that frequently runs ads encouraging college students to join them for worship. Miracle of miracles, one Sunday, a college student, appropriately dyed, pierced and tatted, actually came. He was handed a bulletin at the door. A welcome. It's a dignified church—one of those that continues the practice of having only male ushers who still wear white gloves. It was crowded that day, but the student saw a place to sit and went to it—down the aisle and up the single step to the chancel floor, where he sat down, watching all that was going on around him. A hush fell over the congregation (yes, a hush before worship started). After a few nervous titters, the conversation level gradually rose again, people keeping one eye on the student. As the prelude drew to a close and worship was about to begin, it was clear something would have to be done. The eighty-year-old head usher knew it was his job to do it. Now with every eye watching, he made his dignified way to the chancel and stood next to the student and said, "May I join you?" The student helped the eighty-year-old man to the floor next to him. Turning the table.

Can we remember the ways that someone reached out to us, turning the table to draw us in, when we were feeling left out, uncertain of our welcome or lost in the crowd? Someone remembered our name a week later, or our interests a month later. They introduced us to a friend, or offered a cup of tea. They celebrated or grieved with us. We were helped to find a way to use our gifts or a place to heal our hurts. A name, a note, a hug. Simple acts, quiet comments, gentle touches that transforms the public greeting to a personal welcome. In such moments, we know. We know we are here, not on sufferance or because of the kindness of strangers. We are here because we matter. We belong. We are accepted.

Our place cards completed before worship have been placed by the exits. As we depart, each person is asked to take one place card from the basket, giving each one of us the opportunity to follow the Lord's lead in turning the table. (As with a Secret Santa event, if you pull your own name, toss it back and take another :-). We can begin extending the Lord's ministry to the person named: remembering them in prayer, giving thanks for their presence and gifts (even if you do not yet know what they are). Take comfort that you also are being prayed for.

Then, extend the Lord's welcome to them, by offering a simple act of hospitality. Go for a walk together. Call to chat or send them a note or email of thanksgiving for their presence. Invite them to dinner. Bring them a bouquet from your garden or a treat from your oven. Meet them for

breakfast. Call and plan to meet them and worship together, then go to Fellowship Hall. Get to know one another or catch up on your lives. Make a commitment to do it sometime in the next two weeks. One to one, on behalf of the One who has invited each one of us here, let us be sure that each person knows their presence here this morning, their presence in this community, makes a difference and that he or she has not been lost in the crowd.

Our Lord has made a place for us and all his disciples. Yet he regularly turned the tables to draw in those outside the circle of community. On this day, as we are welcomed at this Table; as we seek to strengthen our relationships with one another, we also need to remember that we are called to turn the tables to welcome those not among us. Our call is not just to tend to ourselves, but to minister to and with the world around us. In your bulletins today, everyone should have found an additional place card. I am going to give folks a moment for reflection before you write on that card.

Take a moment to think about our Fayetteville-Manlius, Dewitt etc. community. Consider what we know about its activities, stresses, and needs, what we know about our neighbors. What person or group who needs us isn't here—who needs purpose, community and faith, and to be welcomed as partners in ministry? I suspect there will be a temptation among us to quickly write "families" or "young people." There is no need to resist that temptation, BUT, but recall the question is "What do we have that they need?" Not vice-versa. So, if that is a group that you choose to write down, also include—for them or anyone else you identify, "what we have that they need." When you leave, place your card in the empty baskets by the doors and your responses will be shared for everyone's reflection. Let's take a moment...

Our Lord is turning the table. Will we be gracious, godly guests, following His lead?