

“MAKING SPACE AT THE TABLE”

Ezekiel 34:1-16

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The first Sunday of Advent, the start of a new church year, a reminder that, liturgically at least, the church sees itself as out of step with the larger culture. Christmas doesn't come at the end of the year for us, but near the very beginning. Our year does not begin with resolutions, but with preparation and waiting. Though our program year coincides roughly with the school year, we return to the fundamentals of our faith and begin to build and nurture it anew with the season of Advent.

So I want to look at the year past and the year ahead through the lens of a single question. Is there space at the table for you? This is a question many of us have asked at some point in our lives. We ask it as we look for the perfect church, as we consider where and how to use our gifts. We ask it about the peer groups we settle into, the activities we might undertake, or the service we might render. Is there a place for me at this table?

This is a critical question because the life of faith is all about the food. Jesus was all about feeding people, especially people who weren't otherwise being fed. On several occasions, he was teaching in the countryside, and after feeding thousands with the word, he fed them bread and fish. And there was more food left than what they had started with. He fed the blind with sight. He fed those whose limbs were weak with strength. He fed sinners with a heaping plate of forgiveness. He fed those who had empty bellies with food and those whose spirits were downcast with the presence of God. He even fed the dead with new life. All the time, Jesus was feeding people.

But there were some who were not hungry, some who had grown fat off food intended for others, some who feasted off the work and contributions of the poor. Jesus had only judgment to offer these, the religious leaders of the day: Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, priests. These were supposed to be feeding the people, not preying on them. These were supposed to be making a space at the table, not occupying the whole bench.

This is what God complains about in the reading from Ezekiel. The shepherds, faith leaders, were supposed to be feeding the sheep. Listen to the indictment again: "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness, you have ruled them."

The Bible is pretty hard on leaders. There isn't really any recognition that the weak often prefer remaining weak so that others can do for them, that sometimes the sick enjoy the attention they receive, that we occasionally like to nurse our own wounds and don't really want to be found. Ministry is a hard thing. Most of us, pastors, elders, deacons, and teachers are doing the best we can. We sometimes despair that it just isn't enough.

Some of you have had a rough year and you still need some help standing on your feet. Some of you are still feeling the lingering effects of serious illness. Some of you have wounds that haven't quite healed over. Some of you are facing changes that you just don't know how you're going to manage. The session and deacons are working to be the kind of church that feeds you, whatever your needs may be, but we won't be successful in every instance. We are only shepherds in the sense that we are willing to partner with God in feeding the sheep; but mostly, we are also sheep.

The promise in Ezekiel is a thousand times better than the judgment. "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...."

There is space at the table for you, because God has made a place for you. It isn't up to me or the session. There is food, good food because God is our shepherd. We will pray for you, support you in whatever your need may be; but you have a voice at the table. You can talk to God directly. And you can tell God anything you want. You can be angry or teary. God listens, is never taken aback by the force of your anger or embarrassed by the depth of your sorrow, as sometimes human beings can be.

There is a space for you at the table when we gather to study scripture. You don't have to be intimidated by the pastor or others around the table who have spent years doing Bible Study, because God speaks through you too. There is a space for you at the table even if you can't sing, or cook, or organize, or lead because God works through you too.

There is space for you at the table of the Lord's Supper, not because the pastor says all the right words or offers up an eloquent prayer, or because you respect the elders serving. There is space for you at this table because Jesus is the host and he offers good food for all who are hungry.

So it's a new year, but we aren't resolving to be better Christians. We aren't anticipating what marvelous things we will be learning in the coming year. We are again waiting as we do every Advent for the certain news that God will be entering our world to make space for you at God's table, where I understand the food is very good. Amen.