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## “At Table”

A sermon by Marilyn Hedgpeth

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year B)

May 21, 2018

Psalm 19:7-10,14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

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Journalist and author Jeff Chu calls himself an asker of questions and a teller of stories. He also self-identifies as Chinese, Christian, gay, married, with a white spouse, and most recently, a Princeton seminarian.

I had the privilege of meeting Jeff at the Kenyon College writers’ conference last summer, where I became smitten by one story of his in particular, about being *at table*.

It’s a story he tells about how his Christian parents, in Hong Kong, are coming to terms with his being gay – over tables.

Jeff comes from a family with a very strong Christian heritage;

his great-grandfather was a Baptist missionary in southern Asia,

his grandfather was a Baptist preacher, as are two of his uncles,  
and his extended family on both sides includes many more pastors,  
deacons, organists, Sunday School teachers and alumni of Baptist institutions.  
Jeff relates an initial conversation he has had with his father about his  
homosexuality,

where he asked his father, “Why is me being gay so hard for Mommy?”

To which his father replied, “We’re not just Christian. We’re Baptist.”

His father seemed surprised that Jeff even had to ask.

(Chu, Jeff. *Does Jesus Really Love Me*. p. 16)

So, as the story goes, Jeff marries his partner, Tristan Ashby, in a ceremony  
where his parents are conspicuously absent and silent.

Not long after their wedding, however, his mother emails to ask if Jeff  
would like for her to fly to New York, where they are living,

to cook a dinner for his birthday, as has been their long-time custom.

Jeff says, when he read her words, his heart raced into hyper-speed,  
and he broke out in a sweat.

She hadn’t visited him in years, and had met his now “husband” only once,

that meeting being quite awkward.

Yes, he typed out his reply to her, of course; we'd love to see you!

And so she flies half a world away, this little woman conflicted by the ambiguity

of what her faith tradition teaches, and what she feels in her mother's heart for her child, whom she cannot abandon.

Upon arrival, she spoke not a word about accepting Tristan into their family,

but as Jeff tells it with tears in his eyes, one of the first things she *does*

do upon arrival is to pull a gift out of her bag for Tristan:

an antique pair of ivory chopsticks identical to ones owned

by every member of their family,

inscribed with Tristan's name on them in red letters.

And then she spends the next two days in the city, shopping and making

preparations to cook all of the Chinese delicacies that her son adores:

griddled scallion pancakes, spring rolls, scrambled egg and tomato,

a half-dozen types of mushrooms, braised abalone,

crisp triangles of two kinds of tofu, beef stew, fried rice, and  
spareribs.

She spoke not a word about accepting Tristan into their family,

yet her actions indicate that she is trying, that she is working hard to  
accept,  
as she lavishly treats the newly-weds and their guests to a feast,  
a great banquet, for them to enjoy together, at table together, at their  
table  
of mercy and reconciliation, at their dinner table hallowed by our Lord's Table.  
(Wood, Barbara. *The Almanac*. "Gay Chinese Christian Talks About What It's Like  
To Not Fit In." 6/30/2016)

Jeff says, at table – "in preparation for it, in meditation on it, in fellowship around  
it –

I learn better lessons and unlearn damaging ones.

If it's true that in the things of this earth, we see glimpses of the new one,  
and if it's true that as Christians we are called to work towards the model  
and the manifestation of the new heaven and the new earth,  
what will the new family table look like?

What does it mean to sit and eat and drink?

What kind of table has God prepared for us – and how does God prepare  
us for it, meal after meal, day after day." (Chu, Jeff. *Together at the Table*,  
1/8/2015)

The eschatological table is a table of grace, where new models of fellowship and neighbor-love are enacted with *signs* of abundance, forgiveness, shalom, and glimpses of God's ever-expanding family.

Theologian Dan Migliore says the Lord's Table "discloses what human life by God's grace, is intended to be – a life together in mutual sharing and love...

To eat and drink at this table is to be united with Jesus and to be nourished by the self-giving, other-affirming, community-forming love of the triune God.

All are invited to this table, but most especially the poor, the sick, and the outcast."

(Migliore, Dan. *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 223-224)

All four Gospels give an account of Jesus entering the Temple (at Passover in John) and reacting viscerally to the scene before him:

people selling sacrificial animals, as is their long-time custom, and money changers exchanging foreign currencies for the official half-shekel for the Temple tax and tithes,

which also is Temple tradition.

Which begs the question, what disturbs Jesus so to flip those tables;  
to whip the sheep, cattle and dove sellers out of the courtyard;  
and to become so incensed that he castigates  
those whom he claims have turned the Lord's house into a marketplace;  
when in actuality, they are just doing what they have always done?

Amy- Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, says "a prophetic prediction  
against the Temple need not indicate that the prophet found the  
institution exploitative," as we might think.

Rather, according to ancient rabbinic scholarship, "the import of the prophet's cry  
was *not* economic, but *eschatological*."

(Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Misunderstood Jew*. "Stereotyping Judaism", p. 153)

In other words, when Jesus rears up like a horse in pain and paws the  
tables before him, I think he is expressing his frustration and anger  
that the these Temple tables before him fail to foreshadow,  
the table of his kingdom vision and the table of his kingdom calling.

This is not the kind of table that Jesus is called to prepare for his people.

This is not the table he, Jesus, the prophet, has chosen to endorse.

This is not a table for the poor, the sick and the outcasts.

This is not a unitive table.

This is a divisive table, of sheep from goats from doves, literally.

This is a table of limited access: clean vs. unclean, native vs. foreigner,  
well-heeled vs. dirt poor.

This is a table where grace is treated like a commodity which can be sold and  
bought,  
instead of the free gift that it truly is.

This Temple table is so far removed from his God vision of the Lord's Table  
which will prefigure and hallow all of our family tables,

kitchen tables, office tables, boardroom tables, conference tables, legislative  
tables,

lunchroom tables, banquet tables, fellowship hall tables, and nursery  
tables -

as models of full sustenance for all, full acceptance and respect for all,

full care for all, that he flips it. And who can blame him?

His table, the Lord's Table, will be a table *where everyone has a prayer...*

and a family, and love, and a place to belong, and yes, enough food to eat.

Friends, the Lord's Table is not a magic table, although sometimes I wish that it were.

I wish that it magically transformed our other tables into replicas of this one.

The Lord's Table is not magic, but it is mimetic, as a sign, a symbol, and a foretaste of what the new family table of God looks like.

It is mimetic: a mime and an emulation of God's eschatological kingdom table, which both reflects God's heavenly banquet, and at the same time prefigures

the earthly character and human actions pleasing in God's sight.

And with that mimetic power, the Lord's Table does shape, and empower, and hallow, and transform all of our other tables into tables

which God prepares for us:

where we will keep company with one another in deeply meaningful ways;

where every person's story will matter;

where we will attend to the loud voices at the table, while keeping our ears keenly attuned to the whispering ones, as well;

where we will work hard to understand and love one another,



even when we don't agree;  
where we will hammer out the peace in non-violent ways that  
protects the lives of everyone around the table;  
but most importantly, where Christ promises to be present at table with us,  
day by day, meal by meal, morsel by morsel, word by word,  
crumb by crumb, sip by sip, spill by spill, laugh by laugh,  
blush by blush, transforming our tables and our  
conversations into God's promise of abundance.

And yes, one more thing I forgot to tell you about Jeff's story; no two more things.

First, Jeff says his mother has been back several times to cook, to visit,

and to be at table with them and each time, he says, it gets a little bit  
easier.

And secondly, his mother's name is....Grace. Amen.

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