

Practicing God's Presence at the Table

Mark 12:28-34

June 18, 2017

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Perhaps it is fitting, that in the midst of this series on hospitality, and on the Sunday in which we say good-bye to each other as pastor and congregation, that we reflect together on a central belief of Christianity: love of God and love of neighbour. Farewells perhaps, don't seem like a practice of hospitality. And yet, when we welcome each other to the table, we need to be prepared to say good-bye, for throughout our lives, we all come and go from many tables. Saying good-bye well is part of the practice of hospitality, so that we can welcome well, and be better equipped to take our place at the next table.

It is hard to practice genuine hospitality, and it is hard to say good-bye. And yet, both of these are spiritual practices of God's presence and require much of us. We have to be willing to make space at the table for new people, and be ready to say good-bye to others when their time comes to leave the table. We have to be willing to take our place at the table, and also be willing to leave that table when it's time to join another table. It is hard to open ourselves up to the presence of God, to really discern and hear what God is saying and how God is leading, whether we are welcoming or leaving the table.

Love of God—it requires all of us, heart, soul, mind and strength. It is what orients us at all times, and particularly when things get difficult; when we face challenges and opposition. This story in Mark comes in the midst of stories of antagonism toward Jesus and between Jesus and various leaders and groups in ancient Judaism. In the midst of so many traditions and varieties of Judaism, a scribe comes to Jesus and wants to know, out of all the laws and commandments, which one is the most important. He seems to be asking, in the midst of so many voices and groups who advocate different paths toward faithfulness, how does one discern the way? How does one know what is the foundation, or centre of the law, of faith? Jesus answers by taking them right back to the foundational commandment; the creed that has been with them for centuries, a creed that calls for absolute devotion: Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Everything that motivates us and calls us into new directions, needs to be

grounded in this central commandment— Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. It is this love of God that will guide and direct.

And then Jesus adds on another equally important commandment, love your neighbour as yourself. Love of neighbour—this too, requires much of us; there is nothing reciprocal about it; we love our neighbour no matter if they are deserving or not, whether we have a personal relationship with them or not. It is putting into practice our love for God; love of neighbour is the practice of God's presence, as we embody the love of God for all creation. The love of God, in addition to directing us, also helps us to know what love of neighbour looks like.

Love of God and love of neighbour—these are the 2 central commandments for our lives and ministry.

There have been many times when I have experienced God's presence and love through you, this congregation—from before we arrived, when we were gifted with a love offering; and then from the moment our moving truck pulled into our driveway here in Goshen and at least 30 of you were there to unload the truck—in 90 degree weather, into a house which had no power. And then, when my visa was delayed by 6 months, you continued to care in tangible ways, through anonymous and sometimes not so anonymous gifts and groceries. Thank you for being a warm welcome to us, and for embodying God's love and care. Our family has been loved and embraced by you, and we have found a home here at Berkey. I will miss this place and each of you, but will carry with me the love and care we have received here.

Thank you for the patience you showed this Canadian as she adjusted to life in the US and life in a different denomination and conference. Particularly, thanks to Dan who sat through lots of my questions—and rants—about how things work here, what this means, why we do things that way. Thank you for being patient with me, and tolerating my questions and wonderings.

I have also seen individuals and families live out the presence of God as you have withstood the trials and difficulties of life: illness, family crises, vocational challenges, loss and grief. I have also seen you live out the presence of God in the

joys and celebrations of new life and new beginnings. Walking with you in these times has been holy ground for me, as you invited me into those moments of deep pain and vulnerability, and deep joy. Thank you for witnessing to me of your deep faith in Christ, who sustains and upholds you. I will always hold as sacred those experiences we shared.

The love and care that you show each other is another clear sign that the presence of God is the foundation and centre of congregational life. You are a community that loves and cares for each other, a community that welcomes the stranger, and generously responds to the needs of others. I have not witnessed a meal ministry that is as active and freely given as the ministry of meals that this congregation provides to college students, families with new babies and people experiencing illness. This is one way in which you have put love into action, a witness to God's presence and care.

I have also witnessed God's presence through the intentional ways in which you think about your mission and ministry, setting a goal for yourselves, and then reaching it. When I came 5 years ago, there were no children under 4 or 5, and the goal was to reach out to people in the first half of life. Within 2 years, a few families had started to come, and the rest is history! Now, you have a new goal in front of you, a goal to engage more interculturally, something I suspect will provide new and unknown challenges and joys; I pray that your practice of God's presence at the table will sustain you and strengthen you as you open yourselves up to this new goal.

God's call is surprising and challenging, and at times confusing. It has been hard for me to understand how and where God is calling me, and how my call and Allan's call fit together. It wasn't easy to uproot ourselves 6 years ago, and the uncertainty about the long term call for Allan and I is a challenge to live with. But God has been faithful and life here in Goshen has been good, in spite of all the challenges of being foreigners in a new country. And in the midst of this uncertainty and challenge, I have sensed without a doubt, God's presence and care, and that each step in the process has been a step I am being called to make. I trust what is unfolding, even as I grieve what I am being asked to let go of. I feel blessed for all the ways that you here at Berkey have walked with me and supported me for the whole of this journey together. You have indeed, been the presence of God to me.

This transition marks a change in our relationship. It ends my leadership here, and while change is hard, just as God has been faithful in the past, so we can trust God to continue to be faithful in providing for all of our needs. As we practice God's presence with us, we have nothing to fear. It is God who upholds us and who will carry each of us through this time of transition. I love you. God bless you. God be with you till we meet again.