



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SETTING A TABLE LARGE ENOUGH”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 19:23-25; Ephesians 2:13-21

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Sunday, October 11, 2015
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Gracious God, we come here very much aware of our divisions. We live in a world of divisions. On this day, help us to move beyond our differences and to see again the vision you have for us: one of a world reconciled through Jesus Christ our Lord. Startle us with the truth of your vision, and open our hearts to receive it, and open our minds and our spirits to be committed to make it a reality among us. All this we ask in the name of the one who came and still comes as your reconciling presence in our world. Let us make room for Him. In his name we pray, Amen.

I was my grandfather's shadow. I followed him everywhere. He was a very successful businessman who owned and operated a lumber mill and hamper factory in North Florida. I followed him around. We all knew his real love, tending his garden and working in his shop. I remember when he told me he was going to make a table for our family for meals like Thanksgiving and Christmas. "I want you to help me," he said. It was a huge table, so as young a fellow might do, I asked him. "Grandad, this is a huge table--why so big?" "Son," he said, "it has got to be large enough to make room for the whole family."

The Lord's Table today is large enough to spread around the globe. People gathered last Sunday, and we are celebrating that today to be nourished by God's presence. Does this make any sense to you?

It seems so obvious that we live in a broken and violent world. Every day, if you turn on the news, on television or pick up a newspaper, you are reminded of the struggles in the Middle East, Syria, Turkey. There is death, violence, sadness, loss. You don't have to be reminded that we live in a broken and violent world. I do not need to tell you that; you are aware of it because it is "in your face" every day. So then, what are we doing here this morning? Did we come here to put a happy face on a broken, hurting world? Is this some sort of fantasy exercise?

My son, Bankston, who is not here today, so I can talk about him, used to say to me when I made some proclamation contrary to the reality he was living in, "Dad, you are on the largest river in Egypt!" "What do you mean?" I would respond. "Dad, you are on denial!"

We have come here this morning to talk about a table—a table that stretches around the globe that gathers people from around the world. What is this? Is it madness, fantasy, wishful thinking? Or are we entertaining a vision of the world as God wants it to be, as God intends it to be, as God came in Christ to reconcile the world?

Decades ago, during a period when the world was in great turmoil, after the Great War and the Second World War, with Europe and Japan in ruins and the human race staggering, almost stunned by its capacity for violence and destruction, cities that had been bombed and destroyed like London, Dresden, Coventry, Berlin, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and then there were Auschwitz, Buchenwald. These places became symbols of the deep pain and suffering. Christians were present at all of these cities. A group of Protestant churches wanted to speak a prophetic and healing word, a word that would affirm our unity as a human race, the precious gift of every human life, and a word that might translate religious beliefs into the politics of peace. They suggested that Christians acknowledge and celebrate their oneness at the Lord's Table in the sacrament of communion

on the first Sunday of October. Christians all around the world were invited to join hands across barriers of race, nationality, time barriers, economic barriers. And then, in the name of their common Lord and common faith, they did something that said to the world, division and destruction is not the way God intends it to be. We are bearing witness to reality that is God's reality, for God's people and for the world.

A great Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, said, "There will be no peace among the peoples of the world without peace among people of faith. There will be no peace among world religions without peace among Christian churches" (Christianity and World Religions, p.442-43).

When Jesus went around ministering in his life, people asked me, "What did he do most of the time?" He healed people and other kinds of things, but one thing he did over and over again was to break bread. He was a "bread breaker." Some people talk about the proclivity of Presbyterians "to meet and greet and eat." Well, we came by it honestly! Jesus was always being invited to sit down at the table. I am comfortable with Jesus being a good host and throwing a lot of parties and inviting people to come together for fellowship and for food.) Then he says, when you throw a party, don't just invite those people who'll invite you back, like your rich neighbors. Invite the poor, the blind, the lame.

Then he told a story about a person who planned a banquet and who sent out a lot of invitations. There was room because people didn't come. They had what sounded like lame excuses: new land, a marriage. So he said to his attendants, "Now go out into the streets and invite people who don't ordinarily get to attend fancy dinner parties: the poor, the blind, the lame. Compel them to come in so that my house may be filled. I want a full house! I want everybody around the table. It is not about the numbers. It is about my vision of a world where the banquet table is open to all."

The table is not reserved for those who have the correct beliefs about the food or about table manners. It is not for those who have the right moral standards. It is certainly not restricted to those who espouse a particular ideology or political philosophy. Jesus says, "My vision of the table is a radical one. All are welcome here." It is precisely the place where all the boundaries that divide the human family—race, religion, political affiliation, tribe, geography, gender, sexual orientation, wealth, poverty—this table is precisely the place where all of that is transcended. We no longer see each other anymore from a human point of view. We see each other through God's eyes--all are children of God. Reconciliation actually happens. The point is not to exclude but to include everyone, until there is a full house.

Yale's distinguished scholar of world religion, Lamin Sanneh, thinks so. "Early Christianity," he says, "unlike any other religion, broke out of the confines of geography and race; Christianity was a religion for all seasons, fit for all humanity."^[1]

Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain's Chief Rabbi, writes, "Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than for us to see God—in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different color, whose faith is not my faith, ... God is my God, but also the God of all humankind."^[2]

Fred Craddock was one of the great preachers who taught many of us the art of preaching. He taught at Emory in Atlanta, wrote numerous books and preached around the world. On one occasion, he was in Ohio in January on a preaching mission. (Not a good idea!) A winter storm came up unexpected (we know something about

^[1] Sanneh, Lamin O. *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 14.

^[2] Sacks, Jonathan. "The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations." *Orbis*, 2002, 46, pp. 601–609.

storms that come up unexpected) and the community shut down--power was out, folks were stranded. Fred Craddock found himself at a motel in some community in Ohio. He asked the clerk at the desk if there was any place he could get some hot food. "Down the road," the clerk pointed, "there is a little restaurant. I understand it has power and they may be serving."

Craddock bundled up and made his way to the restaurant. Sure enough, they were open, crowded with folks like him looking for something warm and nourishing. All they had to serve was hot soup and some bread. "Bring it on!" Craddock told the waitress as he found a seat in the corner of the crowded restaurant.

He had just been served when a single woman entered who looked out of place--poorly dressed, shivering from the cold. She said she had no money--but she was cold and hungry--Could they spare her something warm to eat? "I am sorry," the proprietor told her, "We are full of paying customers." Craddock said all of a sudden a silence fell over the place. One fellow spoke up, "There is room over here at our table with our family. She can join us, and we'll cover the charges." The other patrons chimed in--"Yeh, there is room for her. She is part of our community!"

Craddock said he was amazed and took another spoon full of hot soup and tore off some bread. "You know what, it tasted a lot like the bread and wine of communion."

"Ho, everyone who thirst and come to the waters--drink and eat without price," that was God's invitation.

"Go out and bring them in, all of them," the Lord told the attendants.

The Lord's Table is large enough for you and me and yes, for all God's children!