



Meeting Jesus at the Table

Week 6: A Meal with Chosen Family

Lori Lampert - 04/02/2023

In 1991, one of my favorite movies was released. No, it's not a musical. Set in a fictitious small town in Georgia, it is based on the book by Fanny Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. The producers invested in the mostly abandoned town of Juliette, Georgia to construct the set, particularly the cafe. And one of the simple joys in my life was the day I was sitting there, in a booth with my mom, sipping tea and eating a plate of newly fried green tomatoes. I looked around the room that day, pretending I was one of the wonderful characters in the movie. Idgie or Ruth.

Anyway, the movie goes back and forth in time between a story being told from her past by an elderly woman in a nursing home, Ninny Threadgoode in 1980s Birmingham. It is there that a 40ish Evelyn Couch meets Ninny at a time when Evelyn is trying to understand herself and the woman she is capable of becoming. Their lives begin to intertwine, and the relationship grows. And when it looks like Ninny may be discharged with no place to go, Evelyn begins to create a room for her in the house she shares with her husband Ed. Ed tells her that is *not* going to happen because "she isn't even family." I love what Evelyn proclaims, which brings us to why I am telling you about this great movie today. Evelyn says, with absolute surety, "Well, she is to me."

What does it mean to be family for one another? Can a group of people from diverse backgrounds, ages, cultures, lifestyles, and opinions become family?

Meeting Jesus at the Table has been the theme of our message series as we journey to Jerusalem this Lent. We started at a picnic on a hillside—where the earth was the table and thousands were abundantly fed—to a time when Jesus taught, at the home of a Pharisee, a parable about the graciousness of our God.

And now it is the holiest of weeks. We traditionally begin the week, as we have today, with a Palm parade as Jesus approached Jerusalem. Our thanks to Quincy for being our Jesus. There is joy and wonder as the week starts. On Wednesday, we will share another meal, celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, and talk about what we call the last supper, the final meal of Jesus before his crucifixion.

Friday we will gather here at 7:00 pm for a Good Friday service as with music, scripture, and words of reflection. We will remember the events of the day that forever changed our understanding of the magnitude of God's love as we begin to sense the destructive power of unchecked humanity.

Saturday we invite you to find time to be still. Rest. Contemplate the grave and what so many will believe is the end of the story. And get ready to join us Easter morning to celebrate that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not even death.

But today, let's step back to the day before what we call Palm Sunday. There have been three years of being on the road after Jesus left his family in Nazareth. Three years without a home of his own, with days and weeks and months of ministry where the demands of the crowds have only grown and the threats on his life are growing as well. Jesus is 33 years old, and we can only imagine how tired his body must have been. How very weary from the three years of knowing where this would all lead. I wonder, did the lines of the demands of those years show on his face?

At this point Jesus has lived with an underlying urgency of providing hope, healing, and the truth of the love of God in such a way that it would remain far beyond his time on earth. He knows what his future holds. Jesus has poured his life out as an offering to the Lord, and now it's almost time. Time for that which Jesus had come to be accomplished on the hill called Golgotha. With so much before him, the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus chose to spend that last day at the table of beloved friends. Friends who had become family. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Jesus has come to the home of people who treat him like family. They know who he is. All of who he is. Martha has affirmed Jesus as the Son of God. They have seen Jesus display his power over life and death for he has raised Lazarus from the dead. They love Jesus, and Jesus loves them. Their lives have been intertwined as their friendship grew.

And Mary, Martha, and Lazarus know that bringing Jesus into their home is dangerous. The raising of Lazarus from the dead was the last straw. Jesus has become too well known, too much of a threat, unable to be controlled. The word is out from the religious leaders that anyone who knows where Jesus is should turn him in. Lazarus is a target too—if he disappeared, the story of being brought back from the dead by Jesus would disappear as well.

With chaos spinning around them, with so much before them, the friends gather together to Meet Jesus at the Table. Hear these words from John chapter 12.

¹ Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray

him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

Jesus arrives at the home he has come to know as a place of safety, filled with love. I can almost hear him sigh as he joins Lazarus at the dinner table. Martha, sweet Martha, is serving him once again. It is how she expresses her love. There was a time, when Jesus was in their home, that Martha complained about doing all the work, but not now. She has learned the value of her service and that not everyone, including her sister Mary, is built the same way she is. So Martha gladly serves Jesus, and the whole entourage he brings with him. Again, this is how she knows to show her love. Service.

Mary walks over to Jesus, kneels before him, and places herself at his feet. She too expresses her love, but in an unexpected way. Mary brings forth an extravagantly expensive oil that, as she opens the jar, fills the room with a wonderful scent. She anoints the feet of Jesus with tenderness and devotion. She speaks no words, yet she is saying volumes.

In a few days, Jesus will wash the feet of his disciples and dry them with a towel. In a few days, he will teach them that following him means washing one another's feet. But Mary already has learned this lesson. She is a disciple and knows what pure love looks like. She has received it from Jesus, and now she is embodying it by anointing his feet. And Jesus receives her gift of love. She is a friend. She is family.

Who else is mentioned at this dinner party? The disciples are there too. The betrayer, Judas, has not been left out. He is welcomed by Lazarus, served by Martha. He can smell the fragrance of love as Mary anoints the feet of Jesus.

But he cannot seem to live in this moment. He sees this act of love that is before him and interprets it as waste. Money that could line *his* pockets, as he had been skimming the funds entrusted to him by the disciples and Jesus. Judas uses the poor as an excuse for his own resistance to the love that is around him. He is a naysayer. He is somehow unable to learn from all that has happened the past three years.

Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Judas, and the rest of the disciples are there. Listen to how theologian Nancy Mikoski brings this setting into our time and place as she writes:

Before us then is a first-century dinner party seen as a microcosm of the modern church. The threat of death and the joy of life sit side by side. The richness of worship and the poverty of the world rub shoulders. The quiet and contemplative disciples sit at table with social activists. Sometimes the table feels a bit crowded, and the mood slips from gratitude to pious judgmentalism. So long as Jesus is the honored guest and the focus of the party, the church will live out its life as those called to follow him.

-Nancy Mikoski

In this sanctuary, in this moment, there are those living with the threat of death. A diagnosis that is far too hard to wrap your mind around. The pending loss of a loved one who you will mourn. The grief so heavy that to just get up and worship this morning took monumental strength.

And the threat of death that looms all over the world: Paris does not look like the most beautiful city in the world, with riots amidst the piles and piles of garbage. Haiti is on fire. A Christian school in Nashville—ten minutes away from our niece and nephew and their two precious girls—was the site of another school shooting, and three teachers and three students were killed.

Children in our community hunkered down behind barricaded walls this week under threats that thank God never came to pass. We are all living with the threat of death.

But also: We are living side-by-side with the joy of a new child, the relief of a new job, the cherished laughter of friends. With an old stuffed donkey named Scuffy ridden by a precious child of God as JD tries to keep it from running over palm-waving kids. With the pleasure of seeing friends we have made and of greeting new people who have given us the opportunity to worship with them.

There are people planning weddings and celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. There is delight. There is the joy of being alive today. Of recovering from addictions today. Of making a difference in the life of another today.

And yes, it is true, this church has people in it who are far from perfect. We are real, authentic humans. We do slip from gratitude to judgmentalism at times. We do have moments—and sometimes entire days—when we forget that the very breath in our lungs is a gift. That we are not owners of this church, but instead stewards that hold it in trust for those who will come after us. We forget what it means to love extravagantly, to pour out the expensive perfume as a gift for Jesus Christ, knowing that once it is out of our hands it is no longer ours to control.

Each time we gather. With all of our foibles and fractures, with all of our joy and happiness, with all of our concerns and mistakes. Each time we sit side-by-side with others who have sinned and are repenting, with still others that are caught up in the web of denial and hurt. Each and every time we do this, we move a little closer to the vision we have for The Downtown Church:

The Downtown Church meets in the middle of rich & poor, young & old, believers & nonbelievers. A place where Christ and the community intersect.

Mikoski's words again:

So long as Jesus is the honored guest and the focus of the party, the church will live out its life as those called to follow him.

In a moment you will be invited to come to the table of Jesus Christ as we take part in the sacrament of Holy Communion. All of you are invited. All of you. You are invited to come side-by-side with those whose life may be very different from your own. Introverts and extroverts. Long time Christians, brand new inquirers. Some who are fed up with organized religion but are willing to try today a different type of church.

Some who would never miss a Sunday because worship is integral to their lives. Some whose presence is like fragrant perfume that sweetens the air around them. Some who will be found most days serving the Lord quietly, behind the scenes. Some who are resisting the love of God and even now are thinking about how to make an exit. All are invited to this table where the focus is Jesus. It is his table. He is the honored guest and the generous host. He is both the one giving his body and blood and the one receiving your prayers and pain. He is the focus of this table. Look around you. All are welcome at his table.

Earlier I asked this question: Can a group of people from diverse backgrounds, ages, cultures, lifestyles, opinions become family? You might want to dismiss the idea and say, like skeptical Ed, "These people aren't even family," when instead Jesus says clearly "They are family to me." And at his dinner table, all are welcome. He has already built a room for you. Ready? Join me at the table Jesus has set for you. You are family here.