



All You Can Eat
Luke 9:10-17
Rev. Jenny M. McDevitt
October 27, 2019

As you've seen and heard several times already, our theme for this Stewardship season is "Come to the Table." At its heart, it is an invitation to come and be served. And it is an invitation to come and be the one serving. Which, when you think about it, is what it means to be the church: to encounter something, to receive something, so transformative, we can't help but do everything in our power to share it with others.

The most important table, the capital-T Table, is the Lord's Table. And as we say every week — Jesus himself is the one who invites you, as we remember all the other tables he gathered around. But there is another table, a lowercase-t table, that is Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. I hope you know yourself to be invited to both tables. If you aren't sure today, or haven't been sure before, let me be clear — whether it is the capital-T Table or the lower-case-t table — You are welcome. You are invited. And it won't be the same without you.

Many things happen at tables, of course, but the most important, the most natural, is a meal. The Gospel is absolutely stuffed with shared meals, so much so that when Jesus'

followers became the church, the first thing the world noticed about Christians was that they ate together.¹ Only one of those stories, however, appears in all four gospels — the feeding of the 5,000. Matthew and Mark even tell the story twice.

Every account of the story agrees on a number of details, including that this miracle takes place in the "eremos." That's the Greek for a lonely place, a deserted place. A wilderness place. Every one of them uses that exact same word.

I love the wilderness. The geographical wilderness, anyway. Each summer for the last few years, my friend Jessica Tate — you know her: she preached here this summer and in 2007, she was your David Read Scholar — each summer, Jessica and I find a couple of other friends and we go to one of the most remote places I have ever been — up to the Boundary Waters, the system of lakes that runs along the line between Minnesota and Canada.

For a week, we paddle in further and further. For a week, we couldn't use a cell phone even if we tried, and for a week, because the area is a highly protected one, we

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, page 125.

encounter maybe two or three other people. If we do, it's almost always from a distance. And for a week, if we want to eat, we're dependent either on the food we bring with us, or the fish we catch along the way. If someone says "wilderness" to me, without any context, that is the image that comes to mind. And if you were reading Matthew or Mark's version of this story, you, too, might think of that sort of setting — or at least the day-trip version of that setting. A place set apart. That's the way Matthew and Mark describe it.

Luke's version, though, Luke's version is the one we read today because Luke takes special care to give this story a much more specific setting. This wilderness, this deserted place, Luke says, exists in the middle of a city called Bethsaida.² They are lonely in the city.

We live in one the largest cities anywhere. Have you ever been lonely? If you have — and we all have — you know that loneliness can exist anywhere, even in a place where you are completely surrounded by people. It is in this lonely place in the city that the disciples find themselves. And when the long day begins to draw to a slow close, they approach Jesus and say: "Send them away, so that they can go elsewhere and find what they need." Send *them*. So *they* can go away.

"Them" might be one of the loneliest words in the English language. The most defining thing about "them" is that "they" are not "us." Jesus responds by saying, "You give them something to eat." But what Jesus is really saying is, "Don't send them away. How about we all eat together, right here?"

We have a good number of young people who have started new schools this year. Schools here don't work the way they work almost every other place I've lived. In those places, you could be sure that at least a few of your friends from your old school would end up at your new school. That's not a sure thing around here. And I bet all of you who have started new schools — I bet you understand better than most why Jesus says, "How about we all eat together..." Because you've walked into a cafeteria in a new place and looked around wondering, "Where am I going to sit?" And that question — it doesn't have anything to do with actually eating your lunch, does it? It has everything to do with *who* you're going to eat your lunch *with*. If anyone is going to invite you to sit with them. If someone will look up from their meal and smile. Meals are about nutrition, sure, but when Jesus talks about them, they are about relationship, too. "Don't send them away," Jesus says. "How about we all eat together, right here?"

That is what the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus was teaching them about the kingdom of God right before supper time. Now he's showing them. A number of years ago, Robert Putnam published a book titled *Bowling Alone*, examining the shifts in American community and culture. He pointed to the decline in social institutions — everything from the Rotary Club to Boy Scouts, to homeowner associations, and yes, to churches — places Americans used to be connected with their neighbors. None of them are as strong as they once were.

² "The description of the location as a "lonely place" has created problems, particularly given the size of Bethsaida and other smaller villages in the locality. [Some translations offer various alternative adjectives.] This can reinforce a misleading sense of isolation. "Eremos" simply connotes "wilderness" without any emphasis on location or isolation." *A Festschrift in Honor of Rami Arav: And They Came to Bethsaida...*, edited by Fred Strickert and Richard Freund, page 274-275.

In the most recent statistics I could find, nearly 1 in 4 apartments in Manhattan are occupied by one person. In New York City overall, all five boroughs, that increases to 1 in 2 apartments. Fifty percent of New Yorkers live alone.

Now don't get me wrong — I live alone. I love it. And I think there is even a time in our lives when living alone feels like an achievement: *When you can afford the rent all on your own and you don't need a roommate anymore!* Please understand, I do not mean this as an overall critique, but rather an observation. As a people, we are alone more than we ever have been before.

And where this gets truly worrisome is when the research gets more specific. An article run in the *New York Times* titled "Is Loneliness a Health Epidemic?" notes that especially in the United States, especially in large, urban areas, "it's the poor, the unemployed, the displaced, and the migrant populations that suffer the most from loneliness and isolation. Their lives are unstable, and so are their relationships. When they get lonely, they have the least access to adequate social or medical support."³

As he noted, this is especially prevalent in urban areas — areas where people are used to being alone. Because the more accustomed we are to being alone, the less concerned we are when others are alone, even if their "aleness" is not by choice. This is why Jesus says, "Don't send them away. How about we all eat together, right here?"

And this is why I am so grateful for our Outreach ministries. For the Open Table, where a meal is served every Thursday for anyone who is hungry. For the Overnight Shelter, where up

to 12 men find a place to sleep, and yes, food to eat. This is why I am grateful for the volunteers that make it not just a meal, and not just a cot, but a place to be, a place where our guests are seen and respected. A place where they are fed, in every sense of the word.

"Don't send them away," Jesus says. This is why I am grateful for the ways that you, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, come to the table and make sure others can, too.

The English word companion comes from the Latin "com" and "panis." Com means "with" and panis means "bread." A companion is one with whom we share bread.⁴ Jesus knew that. The disciples said, "Send them away." "Them" is one of the loneliest words. But to Jesus, there is no "them." There is only "us." So why wouldn't we eat together? That is what the kingdom of God looks like.

"You give them something to eat," Jesus said. And so everyone ate, together, and everyone was filled — filled with bread and fish, but also filled with companionship, filled with community, filled with hope and holy expectation for the future, filled with all of the things we are all hungry for. They were lonely in the city, which is why Jesus told them, "Don't send them away. How about we all eat together, right here? How about we all sit down together, and eat together, and talk together, until none of us can imagine sending anyone away, ever again."

"You give them something to eat," Jesus said. So, church: Who are you going to eat with this week? What table will you sit down at, and who will you invite to join you?

³ Eric Klineberg, *Is Loneliness a Health Epidemic?* The New York Times, February 9, 2018. Accessed online: www.nytimes.com/2018/02/09/opinion/sunday/loneliness-health.html

⁴ Held Evans, page 149.