

Ann and I made a bold decision this year. For a year or more we had our home furnished with two dining room tables. It is long story how we got there, but the thing you need to know is our home does not have a designated Dining Room. So one table was awkwardly pushed behind the couch in the living room -- serving as a gigantically oversized plant stand. And the other was shifted into a foyer area that "sort" of managed as a dining room.

But since it is usually just Ann and I eating, we don't often choose to sit at a dining room table, so this second table became a catch all for papers, old mail, books, half-done projects and more mess. This would not matter if the mess was in the back bedroom, but this table was right by the front door, right where guests walked in.

Both of the tables were special in their own way. One was a family heirloom. We got it appraised and are confident it did not have any "antique" value. But it had serious family value. This was the table my grandmother gave to her sister at the time of her first marriage. As we figure it is probably close to 90 years old.

So now, both tables have been forwarded to good homes and the "foyer" has been redesigned as a serene sitting area which will be much easier to keep clean without a big flat surface to fill up.

Tonight it is about the table -- we gather in worship and it is all about God's table.

What if we spelled out a theology of the table? What if each and every table we gather around becomes a sort of Communion table? A hospitality table? A table of love and concern for one another. The sacrament of communion arises out of a profound vision of who Jesus is, the love he demonstrated for humanity and his commandment to remember him. What if every table became a center for sharing memories and building relationship?

The Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee is offering some amazing gatherings around tables here in Milwaukee. In an effort to build relationship among different faiths, the Interfaith Conference offers what they are calling "Amazing Faith Dinners." People of all faiths and no faith, all spiritualities and philosophies gather in small groups to share a meal and participate in a moderated discussion using a proven model which evokes deep exchanges about lived experiences and the role of faith or spirituality in lives of those around the table. Through exploration and dialogue, participants learn about the beliefs and traditions of others within an atmosphere of respect and understanding, and are empowered to stand as witnesses for tolerance for those of a religion or practice different from their own.

Sharing a meal with others is important. It is valuable. It should be a requirement of a healthy life. AND, it is the central metaphor of our faith.

At Emanuel, every time we share communion we make a bold, courageous Christian statement. We make a statement that not every church is prepared to make. We say everyone is invited; young and old, male and female, straight and gay, poor and rich, tall and short, baptized and not baptized --everyone -- without discrimination, without exceptions. We say that God offers this meal of unconditional love and forgiveness to all of us.

I think we do this because we sense the power around the table. Power that all of us need. In the food and fellowship shared around a table disparities are replaced with solidarity, individuality is replaced with hospitality.

I quote from Richard Rohr's book Job and the Mystery of Suffering, "It is an openness to the other, as other, that frees us for creativity and originality....; the other who is somehow outside my social system, or the Absolute Other (God) who gives me a reference point that relativizes all of my own. It is always an encounter with other-ness that changes me. If I am not open to beyond-me, I'm in trouble. Without the other, we are trapped in a perpetual hall of mirrors that only validates and deepens our existing worldviews."

Rohr continues, "One could say that the central theme of the biblical revelation is to call people to encounters with otherness; the alien, the sinner, the Samaritan, the Gentile, the hidden and denied self, angels unaware. And all of these perhaps, in preparation and training for hopeful meetings with true transcendence, the Absolute Other. We need practice moving out of our comfort zones. IT is never a natural response."

In sharing a meal, we learn to embrace others in their brokenness and in their beauty. Through the telling of stories, we bring to life the experiences that shape each of us uniquely. Through listening, we learn to identify with others' pain and celebrate with them in joy. We discover the true humanity in one another. We get past who we think they are, and we encounter who they truly are. Each person sitting around the table is an imperfect, yet beautiful, reflection of God's image.

Jesus ate his final meal with full knowledge that he was eating with one who would betray him when tempted by money, one who would deny him as he faced his trial, and the rest who would fall away believing that his death was the end of the journey. But it wasn't the end, it was just the beginning.

Around a table we experience power. Power to love others for who they truly are. Power to let others see us for who we truly are. Power to replace hostilities with friendships. Power to become witnesses for those very different from ourselves. Power to move from judgment to compassion.

Today Jesus says take this bread, take this cup, do this in remembrance of me -- of who I really am -- of who you really are as a child of God.

Amen

