

ROOM AT THE TABLE Final

**A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, November 16, 2014**

Caught Hiding in the Bathroom

I've been thinking about Thanksgiving. It's a little early yet, but our "Festival of Tables" is coming soon. I should say "festivals" plural because both Thanksgiving and Christmas are coming in the last two months of the year. First, I want to journey back to junior high, if you'll go with me. For some of us, that might not be a happy time, but think with me about lunchtime, for I have a story:

While in eighth grade, I used to eat lunch every day with a group of friends. You probably all did, and it was good to have a group of friends to sit with during the period.

But then a new quarter started, and four of my friends got shifted to a different lunchtime. (We had more than one lunch period at Park Junior High School in Scotch Plains, New Jersey.) This was not good news for me because I stayed in the old lunchtime. On the first day of the new quarter, I walked in and looked at my table, and my friends weren't there. Instead there was a different group of kids I didn't know. What should I do? Where should I sit?

I was very shy and thought, "What do I do?" Well my decision was to hide in the bathroom because I wasn't very hungry anyway. I wasn't hungry at all in fact because I didn't have a bunch of kids to sit with.

Of course a teacher caught me, "What are you doing in here?"

I didn't know what to tell her. I thought, "How can I say It would sound so sad to claim I didn't have friends to sit with at lunchtime." So I answered, "I'm okay. I'm just going to stay here for lunchtime. I'm not hungry."

"Oh no you're not! You're smoking in here!"

"I'm really not smoking." I just kind of I didn't have an excuse. I didn't want to tell her. But she dragged me back into the dining room.

Made Welcome at the Table

The very next day a new group made room for me. After my panic was over, some kids I knew shifted their trays and said, "Janet, come and join us." You can picture that, shifting their trays and making room for somebody. They not only made room, but they made me feel welcome,

too. Bidding welcome is far more hospitable than only making room. I was welcome at that table, and there is a big difference.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” I always use the King James words when I read the 23rd Psalm. It’s almost impossible not to do so because it’s one of those passages of scripture we all pretty much know. And I’ve known it for so long, like The Lord’s Prayer and Amazing Grace, that I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know it. It just feels like it’s been there forever.

Most of my dementia patients still can say the 23rd Psalm with me. It’s a special thing when the memory fades and you can sing Amazing Grace and say the 23rd Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer because they’re in your mind, in your souls, even. We know them so well that we can breeze through them, can’t we? We often do; just zing, and it’s done.

Oiling Your Guests for Dinner

Today we’re going to stop at the table and think a little more. We’re coming to that time of year when we set our tables, or maybe go to new tables to celebrate the holidays. In addition to ourselves, what else is here at this heavenly banquet? The table, we’re told in the 23rd Psalm, is prepared. It’s set for us too, with place settings, perhaps a nice linen tablecloth during the holidays, candlesticks maybe, the fine china, the silver, the crystal.

And room is made for relatives and guests. They don’t even have to shift their trays or their place settings for us when we sit at that table because places have been prepared for us. But there’s also welcome, isn’t there? We’re given a hint in the 23rd Psalm that our enemies will also be there, yet our cups will overflow, but what else? “Thou anointest my head with oil.”

In biblical times in the Middle East, it was the practice that when a man came for dinner, you anointed his head with oil. That was usually done by the servants. But there is an occasion when Jesus was present at a dinner party, and he knew he was not very welcome. Do you remember? Pharisees invited him so as to trip him up, and Jesus said to them later, “You know I came in and there was no kiss for me, and you didn’t anoint me. Clearly I’m not welcome.” The oil is the oil of welcome. Of joy, of gladness that we’re there and we’re together.

There was also a practical reason for the oil. Not to get too earthy about it, but people smelled of sweaty activities in those days, perhaps owing to trudging through the desert, and there was no such thing as deodorant. So you perfumed them with oil in order that your dinner party wouldn’t be spoiled by the scent of body odor.

Nevertheless the act of anointing with oil is really about welcome and joy, and this is why we anoint the sick to this day. It signifies a presence, a beautiful thing. Welcome, in other words, is not just about making room for a visitor but is about offering a place setting for a friend. And not just about a place setting but about joy and abundance in the home. “My cup runneth over.”

Memories of Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving, as you know, is approaching. Are our Thanksgiving tables really like the divine table that's referenced in our beloved Psalm 23? That psalm got me thinking about tables and wondering if our lives are as depicted in our memories. Our Thanksgiving tables are human, and therefore they can show the fissures and cracks in the family and in our lives. Or they may reveal the absence of family – the empty chairs and the lack of resources.

On Friday we're going to put together Thanksgiving bags, a wonderful mission of our church, so I encourage all of you to come and savor pizza and lots of different kinds of desserts before we fill those bags. If you can't make it, write a check or give money or food to provide a dinner for others who really don't have enough.

I'll never forget having to deliver a turkey. I was at Northminster with Rev. Barry Downing and we also delivered Thanksgiving baskets. There we were at the door of a deserving person with a nice big frozen turkey. When we walked into the apartment, though, we saw that the tenant had no stove, only a hot plate – clearly, no resource was available to roast that turkey, so we gave them extra food instead of the turkey.

There are people right next door to us, who really don't have much at all. It's important to remember that the local newspaper has been putting information on giving in its articles, and a lot of you have probably read this motto: "If you're digging into a turkey this year, give a turkey."

Three Times a War Bride

As many of you know, I went to New Jersey on Halloween. It was not a planned trip, but I have an amazing story to tell you about my family. The characters are not blood relatives, but Gerda was my father's companion for many years after my mother passed away. She was a war bride three times over, and my dad had met her 30 or 40 years ago. Gerda Drohn was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1921, and she grew up in Vienna, loving music and her German culture.

However, her world crashed as she watched the Third Reich come into power. She was aware of Kristallnacht and neighbors disappearing. As a young girl, Gerda was engaged to a wonderful young man whom she loved very deeply. They hadn't time to marry before he had to go away to war. He was killed in battle, and at 18 years of age, she had lost her fiancé.

Later, in a Vienna coffee shop, a handsome, striking officer wandered in, and they made eye contact. And guess what? They were married two weeks after a whirlwind courtship. Gerda was heartbroken and out of her mind, as she admitted to me, when she learned that her man had gone to war, was sent to Russia, and had disappeared. As we learned much later, he had been imprisoned in a concentration camp. But for the time being, as several years went by, he was

declared dead, missing in action. It eventually turned out that he had been in a concentration camp.

Then Gerda met an American soldier named Michael Drohn. They fell in love, married, and he took her home to his parents in New Jersey. She had had a daughter already, and she had two more daughters with him. Cheryl was one of them.

Guess what again? The missing-in-action officer ended up alive. Many years later he had surfaced after escaping from concentration camp. He ended up in France, where he remarried and had a family. Eventually he too passed away after the reunion. They all met again, and my father and Gerda and the children all went to France and had a reunion with Jakob, the dad of the oldest daughter.

Loses Citizenship, Gains a Country

Quite a story, right? I really should write it down because Gerda never did. She went through a lot. In fact, because she was married to a Nazi officer, even though he was declared dead and missing, she was stripped of her regular passport and issued a “no citizenship” passport instead. Germany was losing the war, and her German citizenship was stripped from her. She felt that emotionally. But when she came to America and became a citizen, she was deeply proud of that fact. People would ask her, “Where are you from, Gerda? because you could tell by her thick German accent in which she would reply, “Toms River, New Chersey.”

She claimed her citizenship because the government took her citizenship away at the end of WW II because her husband had been a Nazi officer, and therefore she was also considered a Nazi. So when she attained her American citizenship, it meant a great deal to her. She was fit and staunch, very much a woman from Vienna.

After her husband died and after my mom died, my dad and Gerda met once again on a trip to Italy, and they were then together for 20-plus years. My dad passed away in '02, but Gerda became a part of my life, and her daughter Cheryl was our hostess for Thanksgiving for many years. Unfortunately, Cheryl was also a chain smoker, and she had issues. It was tough to be around her, so I admit that I used to grit my teeth when I was going down to Pennsylvania for Thanksgiving every year. I went because these people had become my family, and I truly loved Gerda.

Not all Thanksgiving tables are full of joy, to be honest with you. Although anticipating a decent time, nevertheless I kind of had to force myself to go. I admit that because my Thanksgiving hostess died three days before her mother did. Cheryl smoked a lot, and she died of lung cancer very swiftly. And Gerda had dementia. We hadn't been talking the last year or so. She couldn't understand me on the phone, and she blamed it on her hearing, but I knew there was something else going on.

Finding Room for Remembered Friends

Gerda died three days after her daughter. Her funeral was in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, on Halloween. I attended because I had promised her I would. It was a good trip but a very sad time, of course, for the family and for me, but it made me really think about Thanksgiving.

I can't help but feel that Gerda and Cheryl are going to be there at my friends' Thanksgiving, at the table where I'm going to sit. They're going to be there with my grandparents and my parents, who are also gone, and my brother and all those cousins, even the difficult ones. You know I don't want to go way out and call them enemies, as in Psalm 23. They're not. But there are some people who are not exactly friends, you know. Uncle Charley was crazy, and here he comes, so brace yourself.

We're all there with them, with the living and the ones who've gone before. With the tablecloth and the china and the silver and maybe the turkey salt and pepper shakers and all those memories of Thanksgivings past. There must be room for them all and not just room but welcome too. There must be welcome.

Our old dining room table had leaves. Remember leaves? My new table doesn't do this, but when you have a lot of people coming, it is a process. You have to take the covering off and get on both ends of the table and yank to make room for the leaves that were stored in the closet. And then reset the table. All of this says Thanksgiving to me. Not just the food and the time off and the time with friends and family but pulling that table apart and getting out the china, getting out the silver and polishing and washing and ironing too. And then adding people to the table, making room with joy and abundance, with more than enough for everybody. This is what communion is all about, and Thanksgiving too.

How do we make room within ourselves for everyone? Those who are different, those who bug us, those we don't understand. How do we keep adding leaves to our tables?

A Christmas Song for Thanksgiving

I'm going to read you a favorite song of mine. I have the CD, and Dar Williams is a folk singer who always writes lots of words for her songs. So if I play it, you're not going to understand half the song, but after the service if you'd like to listen to it, I brought it with me so you can. It's a terrific song about dinner at Christmas, but it certainly could be about Thanksgiving too. The title is "The Christians and the Pagans," and it's a great song with great lyrics that I'd like to share with you as my little Thanksgiving gift:

THE CHRISTIANS AND THE PAGANS

"Amber called her uncle and said, 'We're here for the holiday,
Jane and I were having solstice, and now we need a place to stay.'
And her Christ-loving uncle watched his wife hang Mary on a tree.

He watched his son hang candy canes all made with red dye number three.
And he told his niece, 'It's Christmas eve, I know our life is not your style.'
And she said, 'Well, Christmas is like solstice, and we miss you and it's been awhile.'

So the Christians and the pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able.

And just before the meal was served, hands were held and prayers were said.
Sending hope for peace on earth to all their gods and goddesses
The food was great, the tree plugged in, the meal had gone without a hitch
Till Timmy turned to Amber and said, 'Is it true that you're a witch?'
His mom jumped up and said, 'The pies are burning,' and she hit the kitchen.
And it was Jane who spoke, and said, 'It's true your cousin's not a Christian,
But we love trees, we love the snow, the friends we have, the love we share.
And you find magic in your God, and we find magic everywhere.'

So the Christians and the pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able.

And where does magic come from? I think magic's in the learning,
'Cause now when Christians sit with pagans, only pumpkin pies are burning.
When Amber tried to do the dishes, her aunt said, 'Really no, don't bother.'
Amber's uncle saw how Amber looked like Tim and like her father.
He thought about his brother, how they hadn't spoken in a year.
He thought he'd call him up and say, 'it's Christmas and your daughter's here.'
He thought of fathers, sons, and brothers, so his own son tugged his sleeve,
Saying, 'Can I be a pagan?' And dad said, 'We'll discuss it when they leave.'

So the Christians and the pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able.

Lighting trees in darkness, learning new ways from the old,
Making sense of history and drawing warmth out of the cold."

And I would include adding leaves to the table, making room and welcome for all. God bless
you all this holiday season and always.

Amen.