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Years ago, when my son was in about the fourth grade, his teacher took a poll among the students in regard to their eating experiences. The teacher asked, “How many of you eat at least one meal a week with your family at the table without TVs?” Numerous children raised their hands, and the teacher was delighted that so many students ate at least one meal together at the table. The teacher then inquired how many ate at least two meals together a week, and some hands went down. The teacher continued asking about three, then four times a week, and soon all hands went down except for my son’s. The teacher asked him, “How many times do you eat supper together?” and Jonathan replied, “All the time.” Jonathan came home that evening and said, “My teacher said we’re one of the rare families that eat all our meals together at the table.” And then he asked, “Daddy, where else would we eat our supper?”

Little did we know at that time about the studies indicating that children raised in families eating together “is associated with a greater ability to

problem solve; more complex thinking; higher self-esteem and grades; and lower rates of teen smoking, drinking, illegal drug use and prescription drug abuse.”¹ Eating together provides a time to engage in dialogue about what happened during the day, to coordinate schedules, and to laugh together.

Being together at the table, whether eating or doing something else, provides occasions for social interaction, as was the case with

A young mother [who] was writing a letter as her preschool son sat at the table and watched her. He finally asked his mother if he could write a letter as well. The mother affectionately handed her little boy a pencil and paper. As she finished her letter, she watched her son scribble and mark on his paper with all the precision his little fingers could deliver.

Mom leaned over and curiously looked at his letter. “And what have you written, young man?”

The little boy looked up at his mother, looked back down at his paper, then looked at his mother again. “I don’t know, Mommy, I haven’t learned to read yet!”²

Eating together even improves our lives as we age, for social interactions seem to help our

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memory and cognitive functions. Maybe that's why we as Disciples of Christ enjoy our potluck meals so much and why we gather around the Table every week to break bread. Our identity statement describes us as, "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."

Isn't that amazing—that we welcome everyone to the Table? Even those who don't agree with you? We welcome those with different politics, racial and economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and even different beliefs about God. Sometimes gathering with such a diverse group at the Table can lead to disagreements, but we as a church have learned that we can agree to disagree. God is so diverse, there's no way any one of our ideas can capture the full essence of God. It's the mixture of our various experiences with God that helps us see the bigger picture.

Even Jesus' closest followers did not always agree at the table, for James and John asked Jesus if

they could sit next to him at his right and left sides, honored positions for important people. They envisioned Jesus claiming some social status with prestige and power, and they wanted to be right up front where they could bask in the light of his popularity.

Jesus replied, "You don't know what you're asking, for you won't be able to drink out of the cup that I must drink."

When the rest of his followers heard this conversation, they were indignant. "Hey, what about us? We want important seats too. Just last week I called dibs on the chair next to you, Jesus, so how come James and John get to sit there this week?!"

Jesus reprimanded all of them, "This is not how it's going to be, guys. Fighting over seats is like what some people do when they overuse their authority for personal gains, but by following me, you must be a servant. I'm not here to be served, but to serve others."

Just imagine the disappointment some of those followers might have felt. No VIP seating. No special

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chairs. No servants to bring their mid-day snacks. They would have to wait for a seat at the table just like everyone else.

Have you ever had a hard time waiting to be at the table? One couple experienced the frustration of having to wait and decide to try a shortcut. The husband explains:

My wife and I decided to eat out one night, but failed to make reservations. When we arrived at our favorite restaurant, we learned that several people had signed up for a table ahead of us. I left our name with the hostess and we sat in the reception area.

Soon thereafter, a disgruntled couple left the restaurant, complaining that the wait was too long. Within minutes, the hostess called, “Walker?” No one responded. She called again but to no avail.

Quickly, I convinced my wife that if we told the hostess we were the Walkers, we’d get seated faster.

As we approached her, she said, “Walker?” I nodded. “We’ve been expecting you,” she informed us. “Your family is waiting in the dining room.”³

Even after patiently waiting to get to the table, sitting together at a table is not easy to do when we bring our conflicts, but Psalm 23 reminds us that God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. Can you imagine that? God sets the table while our enemies are sitting with us in the same room!

Some may find the idea of eating with enemies so distasteful that they interpret this passage in a different way. One interpreter in an online chat group viewed this passage from the perspective of an invitation to a king’s dinner, but rather than including the enemies in the guest list, the writer suggested that the enemies

have to stand off and watch as [the king] enjoys the favor of the Lord and they can't do anything about it. That God prepares...a banquet table in front of His enemies, [means it] is the ultimate rebuke of [the enemies].”⁴

Another writer said a similar thing, that “as God prepares and serves your feast, he makes your enemies sit on the outer fringe of the scene and watch everything unfold.”⁵

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I've always thought this passage from Psalm 23 suggested that God is a gracious host, even inviting one's enemies to sit at the table, so I was surprised to read these exclusive interpretations.

So...who *is* invited to the table? Our enemies? Or only those who think like us, leaving the others on the outside looking in?

I came across another writer who also struggled with trying to understand who's welcome at the table:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. I don't know about you, but I'm looking back at God and going, "Really? They have to be there, too? Couldn't you just wipe them out?"... you invite my enemies?? Is this really the way that God works?... God, I'm a child of yours. I'm deeply loved and if you could just...destroy, wipeout,

¹ www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/apr/14/health-benefits-eating-together/

² Hodgin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 1375-1380). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #119.

³ Hodgin, #438.

eliminate from my life completely and totally, my enemies....THEN...we can have a feast. Then we can celebrate. Then we can party. Many followers of Jesus are waiting for exactly that!

The only problem is....God prepares a table before you not in the absence of your enemies, but in the presence of your enemies. So, as followers of Jesus, I think we need to get a little bit better at feasting on the gospel of grace in the presence of pushback. In the presence of enemies. In the presence of failure and defeat and things not going the way that we want. We have to get a lot better at eating with our enemies. Jesus was really good at this.⁶

During our continuing journey through Lent as we approach Easter, I invite you to imagine yourself in the presence of Jesus at the table. Where are you sitting? And who else is at the table?

⁴ www.worthychristianforums.com/topic/147733-whats-the-real-meaning-of-god-preparing-a-table-before-my-en/

⁵ <https://worldchallenge.org/newsletter/2015/feasting-in-the-presence-of-your-enemy>

⁶ <https://southfellowship.org/good-shepherd-enemy-at-the-table-psalm-23>