

1

There's something about gathering around a table that creates a bond, whether it's while eating food, having a conversation, reading a book with someone you love, studying the Bible, baking Christmas cookies, or creating a homemade ornament for the Christmas tree. Even though the table may lie between us, it somehow brings us closer together. How can a large piece of wood that divides us bring us closer? It's a mystery.

We find those kinds of mysteries throughout the Bible, as in Luke's Gospel when Zechariah spoke about the birth of his son, John, who would later be called the Baptizer for inviting people to come to a stream, be immersed, ask for forgiveness, and turn around their lives. It's not the water that offers forgiveness, it's God grace in our lives, and yet, the water reminds us how God cleanses us over and over again every day, mistake after mistake.

When Zechariah learned about the coming birth of his son, he wrote how their lives were blessed and how God had looked lovingly upon them, and yet he knew the reality of their lives living under an

oppressive Roman government. How can one be blessed and oppressed at the same time? It's a mystery.

He spoke about holy prophets who brought words of hope, and yet, God's people had been waiting a long time, hundreds of years, for a Messiah to lead them to freedom. How do you endure that long of waiting and still see hope? It's a mystery.

Zechariah spoke about enemies and mercy, fear and holiness, a mighty savior and a child, darkness and the dawning of light. Seemingly opposites. Mysteries. Zechariah ended his prophetic words by speaking of sitting in darkness in the shadow of death and guiding our feet to peace. How can one *sit* in darkness and *walk* in peace at the same time? It's a mystery.

His words remind me of Psalm 23, where the writer spoke about God as our shepherd, leading us to green pastures and still waters and walking through valleys with shadows of death. I like the pastures and streams, but why the valley of

2

shadows? Can't we just have just the streams without the shadows? Once again, they go together. It's a mystery.

And then in this psalm, preparing a table in the presence of my enemies? What's with that? Why not just my friends and family? Why my enemies? I once heard someone suggest that the table was prepared inside the house while the enemies stood outside watching, drooling at the luscious food that only the friends got to eat inside. I never envisioned this interpretation, for I've always imagined God inviting the enemies to sit at my table, welcoming us both to the banquet. This psalm suggests to me that God is saving a place at the table for not only myself, but for my enemies as well.

Why is it that we like to keep certain people away from the table? Is it because they don't have our proper table manners? They use the wrong fork for the salad? They spill a bit of food on themselves? They make sounds that we're not used to hearing?

Grace Imathiu, a United Methodist pastor who served as a church planter in Kenya, suggested that "For those who are loved, there's always room at the table." She also realized, however, how difficult it is to welcome everyone:

sometimes we protect ourselves by having separate tables, but if we eat at the same table...then our eyes are able to see you know what? I need to just take one scoop of this rice because this big dish is going to go around the 17 of us around the table. If we all take one scoop, there'll be plenty. If I take seven scoops, it will not be enough. And so I think a lot of times we just blind ourselves from seeing who else needs something. So this idea of making room at the table is so powerful because then we know, we will see how we can share.<sup>1</sup>

As she told this story, pastor Marcia McFee who was listening to the story recalled, a friend who had triplets and they had a table and they didn't really have enough money to get another table. So they cut three holes in the table.... They bolted a child's seat underneath it so the kids could just sit right in the table and then they put a tea towel around them.... They figured out a way to welcome this abundance

3

that they had not expected in their lives no matter how small that space was.<sup>2</sup>

What a wonderful vision of the table—finding a way to get everyone around it. Changing the table so everyone fits. Sharing the abundance so everyone has enough. When we see ourselves as one part of the many parts, as part of a whole picture, then what we do for others we also do for ourselves. When we view ourselves in this way, we save a place at the table for peace.

Black Elk, a Lakota Medicine Man, once said, “The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that its center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”

---

<sup>1</sup> © www.worshipdesignstudio.com/theinn.

<sup>2</sup> © www.worshipdesignstudio.com/theinn.

In reflecting on these words, one writer observed,

This message of our oneness with God and everything else resonates throughout nearly every religious tradition across the globe. Traces of it can be heard in the teachings of the Buddha, and in Native American spirituality, and, yes, even in the New Testament epistles and the Gospels themselves.. Jesus told us that whatever we do to others, we do it to him. Loving God and loving others are the very same thing. The Kingdom of God is within each of us. We don’t need to go out and find it, or search for it. The doorway is within us.<sup>3</sup>

If we see ourselves as united with everyone, sitting at the same table, eating the same food, loving the same God, then maybe we can see that we have saved a place at the table for peace, the greatest gift to give one another all year long.

---

<sup>3</sup> Keith Giles, “The Gospel According to Black Elk,” 11/29/21, [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/keithgiles/2021/11/gospel\\_according\\_black\\_elk/](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/keithgiles/2021/11/gospel_according_black_elk/)