



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

A Spacious Table

October 1, 2017- 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 66.1-12 and Philippians 2.5-11

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Walter Brueggemann is one of the great biblical scholars with whom God has blessed the church in this particular period of history. His specialty is the Old Testament, and he has written compelling books on the prophets, on King David, and especially the Psalms. His approach to the Psalms, the great hymnbook of the Bible, is to classify them into one of three categories – psalms of orientation which celebrate our blessed rootedness in God; psalms of disorientation which express our anguish and fear and outrage when life goes awry; and psalms of new orientation wherein we find a new and deeper comprehension, one matured by suffering, of our relationship with God. I find this pattern – orientation, disorientation, new orientation – a powerful way to consider not only the psalms, but much of scripture. And the reason that is so, is that Brueggemann’s pattern is itself rooted in the very nature of human experience. Presbyterian Pastor Linda Loving, in a meditation on this reality, puts it well when she writes:

These categories offer an ancient choreography reflecting a constant movement in the life of faith, two movements specifically: first, out of a season of settled orientation into a season of disorientation; second, out of a context of disorientation into a new orientation. . . [We are always] somewhere on this continuum . . . It is not possible to hold still, anymore than it is possible for the earth to stop

turning on its axis. God keeps us in a faithful spin all our days. No individual who draws breath can avoid these movements, nor can any congregation.

Simply put, this is the path we tread as we go forward with and towards the God who is drawing us into the future. As a bumper sticker I saw recently rather poignantly puts it: There will be no return to normal!

My guess is we're all pretty clear on what orientation feels like. Life is good. We know who we are, who God is, where we are going and how to get there. Maybe we've found the girl or guy of our dreams and the job we've always hoped for. Maybe we're still finding work satisfying after many years, and maybe we still like our life partner and are thankful their eyesight has failed sufficiently to overlook our wrinkles and their heart blossomed into the organ of forgiveness it is meant to be. Orientation is a time of clarity and satisfaction with ourselves and our world.

Disorientation is also familiar to us. It can come to us on a large scale – like 9/11 or the global climate crisis. It can come to us on a community scale – as when there is a change in leadership or an economic downturn or a devastating hurricane. It can come to us on the individual level – as when we experience the death of a loved one or a relocation or a breakdown of a relationship or our health. In such moments, much in life seems suddenly unfamiliar, up for grabs. We identify with the poet Dante who wrote at the opening of the *Divine Comedy* that he felt himself to be deep in a dark wood, with no trace of a straight path. Cramped by the press of circumstances, crushed by a sense of having no good

options, crowded by unwanted feelings of uncertainty or fear, we experience disorientation.

Disorientation is an experience with which Jesus was familiar, and that is part of the reason we turn to Jesus confident of his ability to understand us and our circumstances. For Jesus lived this same pattern that we know so well. As the great hymn to Christ that is our New Testament lesson for this day tells us, Jesus began in the form of God. That's just about as oriented as it can possibly get! But then he emptied himself, took the form of a slave, became human, became obedient to death as we are, even the agonized death of crucifixion. And that's about as disoriented as it gets. And then, the wondrous truth of resurrection, new life in which Jesus is vindicated, raised, exalted. The ultimate in new orientation. And it is Jesus' walking of the path that is ours, not our protesting that life is unfair to be so constructed, that is our hope.

Psalms 66 is one of the psalms Walter Brueggemann identifies as a psalm of new orientation. After a time of exile and burdens and the nearness of death, the psalmist exalts, "God has brought us to a spacious place." Rather like emerging from a forest dank and dark into a meadow open to a sun-filled sky and green with grass. A spacious place, new to us, but where we can stretch and breathe again, and dare to explore wonders and possibilities never before known to us. In a season of new orientation, life is good again but not in same way it was in times past. We have been made deeper, hopefully more grateful and compassionate, more complete in our humanity through our difficult sojourn through disorientation.

A spacious place. Where is that spacious place? Where is that place of new orientation where there's room for all of us, for all that each of us is? My beloved in Christ, it is at this table. This table is our spacious place. It is the place where we meet the One who has lived the pattern of life we must live, who has made the journey we again and again make, from orientation into disorientation into new orientation. A spacious place, this table. There is room here for all of us. And are we not thankful beyond words it is so?

It's World Communion Sunday, one of my very favorite days of the Christian year. This is the day when the limitations of physical space are overcome, and we sense our belonging to God's people everywhere, all around the planet, wherever they may be. In a few moments, during the sacrament, I will be mindful and heartfelt of beloved friends and family in Three Rivers and Ann Arbor and Lansing, Michigan; in Illinois and Texas and Massachusetts; and in South Africa and India and Spain, all of whom will be at the Lord's table this very day. And I hope you'll join me in such thought and feeling as you come to this table where space is overcome. Maybe you'll be thinking of folks in Montana or Indiana or Florida, in Haiti or Ghana or Australia. Among us, we will be holding in our hearts dozens, scores, of other people and places. And in the mystery and majesty of God's great love, we'll be with them, right here, right now, at this spacious table. That's what I love about World Communion. For a moment in time, the body of Christ, all together.

But there is a danger here, too. It is, after all, often easier to love folks at a distance. I believe it was irascible Lucy in the comic strip *Peanuts* who once exclaimed, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand." The challenge as we

come to this spacious table, is to make room for the folks nearby, especially the ones we do not find it easy to love or forgive or accept, those people God has placed in my life to remind me of the limits of my compassion.

My beloved in Christ, we are called to know, and know deeply, that this table has space for all of us. Jesus was often judged by whom he would eat with, and judged harshly because he would eat with anyone – women, Pharisees, lepers, the unclean, folks other people either despised or feared or wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. This spacious table is the place where we will eat with anyone, with everyone, those we love and those we don't, those we get and those who are utter mysteries to us, those we find familiar and those we find odd. This spacious table is the Lord's table, and all are welcome here, must be welcome here, if it is so to be.

And there is more. This table is spacious enough that we can bring all of ourselves. Not just our best selves, but our broken selves. Not just our public selves, but our private selves. Not just our confident selves, but our anxious selves. Not just our oriented selves, but our disoriented selves. We sometimes say in the communion liturgy, "People will come from north and south and east and west and sit at table." And so it is. Some of us come from the north, chilled to the bone and coldly determined to get even, to settle a score. Some of us come from the south, hot with righteous indignation at a wrong we believe we've suffered or how wrongheaded we think some folks are. Some will come from the east where each sunrise brings no relief from a distressing burden or a destructive behavior long borne. Some will come from the west where each sunset reminds them of losses known and heavy grief all too present.

And there is space here for all of that, for all that we are. Because here we are met by the One who has known all the jolting disorientations we know. Here we meet the One who now lives in joyous, glorious, eternal orientation. And the good news of the gospel is that God in Christ will lift us from disorientation not just in eternity, but in this life. We come to this spacious table to remember and to anticipate that truth.

In her wise book *Small Wonder*, Barbara Kingsolver writes:

I suspect that the deepest of all human wishes, down there on the floor of the soul underneath the scattered rugs of lust and thirst and hunger, is the tongue and groove desire to be understood.

We come to this place where we are understood by the One who not only knows us and understand us, but who loves us anyway, who has done so all our days, who loves all the world in precisely the same way, in spite of all the ways we have found to carve it up into a hundred variations of us and them.

I'm preaching today because Seth got in late last night from leading our congregation's pilgrimage group on the Camino de Santiago de Compestela in Spain. I am so very eager to hear their stories. Like them, Pat and I walked the last 100 kilometers of that ancient pilgrimage route just a year ago. It was an extraordinary experience. The night before we walked into the city of Santiago with its ancient streets and great cathedral where people have been gathering for

1200 years, the group we were with gathered in an exquisitely lovely 14th century stone chapel, for worship with communion. In our group were Protestants, Catholics, agnostics, a Jew, folks from all over the U.S. and the world. Remembering how Jesus said on Palm Sunday that if his disciples were silent, the stones would speak, we sat in silence listening to the ancient stones of that chapel that had heard so much for so many years, just like those all around us here, this morning. Five minutes of silence went by, ten minutes went by, fifteen minutes went by without a sound. I looked up and saw tears running down many faces. One woman was just beaming as if she was as oriented as it is humanly possible to be. Pat then read the story of Emmaus, I said a few words about how both the journey and the destination mattered, about how the experience was both an individual one and a group one, and so forth. We had a basket of fine Spanish bread and a bottle of fine Spanish wine on the table. I talked a bit about all that bread means to us, all that wine symbolizes, and invited all who wished to come and partake. One by one, every single person came, some in tears, some beaming with joy. It was sacred. It was communion. It was God's spacious table. It was the kingdom of God.

It's World Communion Sunday. And we are invited to a table spacious enough for all the world, spacious enough for all of us, spacious enough for all that each of us is. It is God's spacious table. And it is the place where we touch the new orientation we seek and that is our destiny. Come. The table is ready. Come, from north and south and east and west, come wherever you are on the pilgrimage, come whomever you are right now. Come.

Amen