



## A Reservation at the Table

*TEXT*  
*Acts 2:43–47*  
*Luke 24:13–35*

January 24, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**T**his is God’s house, and it is our home. One of the ways this feels like home is that there is a table here. Every home has a table. You probably don’t have a baptismal font at your house. And most of you won’t have a pulpit in your home; though for some of us, our family may sometimes feel that we act like we do. But you will have a table. A table is part of what makes a house a home.

And this is for sure: You can’t have a sanctuary without a table.

One of the first things that people noticed about Christians is that they ate together. It’s not common for everyone to eat together. Men and women didn’t always eat together. Slaves and free didn’t eat together. Jews and Gentiles didn’t eat together. We have kids’ tables and grown-up tables. Any school cafeteria is divided by tribes. It’s worth considering why it was so important for Christians to be at the same table.

When we have communion, I invite you to hold the bread until everyone is served, and we take that all together. Something happens when we eat together. I would love for us to drink the cup together also, but I know if

your hands shake a little or you are worshipping with a four-year-old, holding a cup for two minutes may be harder than it seems.

But we get the point: We are at this table together.

How often do you eat with others? Zach and I were reflecting on a common decision in both of our homes. At mealtime, the decision is the table or the den. In the den, we watch the news while we eat. At our table, there’s no TV, so we talk. It’s a good thing to do.

In our culture, families don’t often eat together. If that is your pattern, consider how you might make it a discipline to eat together, at least a time or two each week. It matters. If I understand the text, being at the table together reminded the church that they were family, but also reminded them of the character of this family.

Luke tells the story of Jesus spending the afternoon with disciples. They don’t recognize Jesus. I can’t explain that, but it is a consistent witness in scripture that the resurrected Jesus is not easy to recognize.

It says he broke bread, and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. It reads like a magical moment: Be at table

and you will meet Jesus. It’s not magic. If I understand the text, what happened at the table and what happened on the road are connected. What they brought to this table were the stories that Jesus shared with them on the road.

Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he opened the scriptures to us? The table is not only the place we eat, but it has always been a place we tell stories. And the stories we tell remind us that we are family — and the character of this family.

For Thanksgiving this year, we gathered at the table. The food was plentiful. Our kids were home. We set a few extra places for friends. We served our traditional vegetarian Thanksgiving. We laughed a lot. Before long, we began telling stories. Almost all of the stories we have told before.

It started with the one about our first Thanksgiving. Carol asked me to look at the label and tell her how many pounds the turkey was, so she would know how long to cook it. I said three pounds. The turkey was 13 pounds, but the label was torn and the “1” was missing. Yes, I know, you would think we both would have noticed the difference, but I wasn’t paying attention. We ate dinner at about

9:30 that night. The Thanksgiving turkey is not the reason we are vegetarian, but it helps.

Sarah told of the time she picked up the chipmunk and it bit her, drawing blood. She ran to her mother for comfort. Carol was working in the flower bed and, without even looking up, she said, “Sarah, you should know not to pick up wild animals.” We still laugh at that one.

Nathan told the story of moving to Florida. It was there that I told him the neighborhood ice cream truck was a music truck. I think he will tell that at my funeral.

We remembered the time Carol and I ate “groundnut soup” in the back villages of Ghana, West Africa. There was not enough food in that village. So when we, their Christian guests, arrived, they prepared the soup for us. They served us and then watched us eat the soup, gifts from them. That soup was hot enough to melt your hair. It was not officially a communion table, but I learned something about what some will do for family — particularly if they regard you as the family of Christ. My eyes were opened and I recognized him. Jesus was there, and he was African that day.

Then we told some stories of moments that none of us experienced, but we claim as part of our family history.

My grandfather, when he was in seminary, was invited to be a guest preacher in a small town about an hour or so from seminary. He got up that Sunday and drove to town, but the trip took longer than he had calculated.

He arrived at straight up 11:00, so he parked the car on the town square and raced into the narthex. An usher handed him a bulletin, and he walked straight down the aisle and into the chancel.

The service was underway as the prelude was ending. The elder in the chancel smiled at him and then stood to lead the call to worship.

It was then that my grandfather looked more closely at his bulletin and realized he had walked not into the First Presbyterian Church, but into the First Baptist Church. And the elder leading the call to worship was not an elder at all, but actually the pastor of the First Baptist Church — which is why he kept turning nervously and looking at my grandfather.

There was no graceful way out of this. As they sang the opening hymn, he walked down the aisle again — and across the town square, where the Presbyterians were very glad to see him. Some will say it doesn’t matter where you go to church, as long as you go to church somewhere. My grandfather said sometimes it matters where you go.

Then I told them about Erving Williams. My parents sat with Dr. Dawson Horn and his wife in a 1964 West Point, Mississippi, restaurant. Erving Williams, the manager and also a member of the Presbyterian Church, said loud enough for everyone to hear, “Anything you want, I’ll bring you anything you want.” Most folks left the restaurant. I don’t have to tell you why.

My dad was only in town for a few more months, and then

we moved to Montgomery. He said Erving Williams was one of the bravest men he has known. Mr. Williams had nowhere else to go.

The table is a place for stories. We don’t just eat at table; we remember the stories that make our hearts burn within us. The stories we choose to remember define us.

This table is like that too. The food is minimalist, but it is rich. The company is complicated, but we are family. And the stories told here are the stories that define us. And when we remember the stories of this table, we might see Jesus. It’s happened before.

Every time, we remember this story: On his last night, he took bread and blessed it and broke it. They had done this countless times before, I am sure. I think he took bread because he knew that in his culture and in ours, we seldom have a meal without bread. It would be a daily reminder that he gave himself for us. So not only at this table, but at any table, we remember he gave us his body. He would do anything for you. That’s why there is always a reservation for you at this table. We can’t have the Lord’s meal without you.

But it’s more than that. I bet they remembered the time they ate without a table. It was in the middle of the desert. Do you remember? There were 5,000 there. It had been a long day, and everyone was hungry. Jesus looked at his 12 disciples, none of whom had a degree in hospitality. “Feed them.” They did.

They didn’t think it would work when they started, but they

found a lunch box, and they gave it to him — no doubt embarrassed at how inadequate their offering was. But he took what they had and fed them all.

They wanted us to know that story because the needs of the world are huge, and our capacity to fix things is limited. But we need to give what we have to God, and good things will result.

If Matthew was there, no doubt he would have remembered the first time Jesus walked up to his tax table and told him, “I want to have lunch with you.” Nobody did that. No one wanted to eat with tax collectors. But Jesus would eat with anyone.

Remember Zacchaeus? “Zacchaeus, come down because I am eating at your house today.”

Everyone stood out in the street and complained about that. “He is eating with a sinner,” they said. Jesus told them, “No, he’s part of my family.” When Jesus broke bread, it was for everyone. No one is excluded from his table. No one.

We could remember more stories, and we should.

There’s the story of Paul, the bold apostle who would face shipwreck and floggings; and he would endure time in prison, all that he might boldly proclaim the gospel.

And then we read Paul’s letter to Timothy, his son in the faith. He’s shivering and lonely, in prison once again. He just wants to see his son one last time. “Come before winter,” he writes. “I don’t know that I will survive the winter. Come, I need to see you, Timothy, one last time.”

You could talk about Abraham under the stars or Miriam dancing by the waters.

You could talk about Peter who walked on water — or Peter, from my former congregation, who took a small heater to Rebekah. She was a recluse who probably had not had anyone visit her in a decade. Peter showed up with a heater to take the chill off of the temperature inside her unheated home and kindness to take the edge off her loneliness.

At this table, we remember the stories of all the saints, both beautiful and broken — those who share our labor now and those whose rest is won. They meet at this table.

Remembering these stories reminds us that we are family, and it reminds us what kind of family we are. These stories show us what it means to be the church.

It’s where our hope comes from. Those times we are courageous, it is where our courage comes from. Those times we are gracious, it comes from this table.

When we live like the family of Christ out there, it is because we have tasted his grace in here. So we have this table to remind us that we are family and the character of our connection to one another. And when we remember these stories rightly, our eyes just may be opened, and we might see Jesus here. It has happened before.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).