

It's good to be back with you all after being away last week to preach at my friend Tracy's installation as Priest-in-Charge at Zion Episcopal Church in NY. One of the things that stood out to me about being there was how their altar is against the back wall so when the bishop celebrated the Eucharist he did so with his back towards the congregation.

I won't get too deep into the history of church architecture, but altars built against east facing walls became popular starting in the 4th century. The theology of this set up puts the priest in the position of mediator, praying on behalf of the people they lead, facing God who is somewhere "out there". While the priest was positioned between the people and God, they worshipped and prayed facing God together.

Our theology shifted in the 20th century, and most churches moved the altars away from the wall returning to the earlier custom of everyone gathering around the table, with priests facing the people. This places the focus on God being present at the table in the bread and wine, rather than somewhere out there. The priest then became seen as the presider of the prayers, setting the table, serving the people gathered, and not the mediator, positioned between God and God's people.

Our worship spaces say a lot about our theology.

The high pulpit in the center of the space was designed at a time when morning prayer was the custom rather than celebrating the eucharist every Sunday. While it had practical purposes, helping with amplification and visualization, theologically, it communicated the significance of the spoken WORD: sermon over sacraments. A high altar promotes the primacy of preaching. Personally, I prefer to preach, next to the altar to validate the significance of word and sacrament and also because I don't want to look down on you or force you to look up at me.

Places and positions matter.

In today's Gospel Jesus is having a meal at the home of a religious leader and he watches how people find a seat at the table, choosing the places of honor. Then he tells them a parable about a wedding banquet and instructs his listeners to "sit at the lowest place" rather than "put yourself forward...in the place of the great" and risk being embarrassed when someone asks you to move down so someone more important can have your place.

On the surface it seems like Jesus is talking about proper etiquette and good manners, but a deeper reading reveals that he's really teaching about power and prestige, hospitality and humility.

Jesus is reiterating that he came to serve rather than be served, that the first will be last and the last will be first, that those who "exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus takes it a step further by saying, "when you host a luncheon or dinner do not invite your friends" or family. Instead, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind"; those who cannot repay you.

Which invites us to consider what kind of tables have we built and who we have invited to sit at our table...

Many organizations are built on a boardroom model of leadership with a long rectangular table where a CEO sits at the head of the table demonstrating authority and their associates sit in the proper pecking-order. This type of leadership has its pros and cons. It's appealing because it's clear, everyone knows who the boss is.

There are even churches who have this set up. We call them "Rector-centric" churches because they are notorious for having that top-down approach to ministry where the assumption is that "Father or Mother" knows best. Then there are other churches where the priority is given to those who have been members the longest, are the loudest, or pledge the most.

But this is not Jesus' way. He inverts the power dynamics and proposes another way. Jesus is not the type of leader to sit at the head of the table. He sets the example of a servant, washing his disciples (who he calls friends) feet, inviting them to do the same. Jesus wants to sit at tables with people who cannot offer anything in return, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

It seems to me the alternative to the boardroom table is building **round tables** where everyone is equal; everyone can be seen and heard.

Which reminds me of a parable about a man who had a vision of heaven and hell.

In his vision he is shown a room full of people gathered around a beautiful banquet table full of the most delicious food. But the people sitting around the table look sad, sickly and appear to be starving, despite the abundance of food in front of them. Soon it's clear why. Every person at the table has in each of their hand's utensils with long handles, handles so long they cannot manage to feed themselves no matter how hard they tried to twist and turn. This, the man realized, was hell.

Then the man is taken to another room where he sees a similar scene...

This room is also full of people gathered around a beautiful banquet table with an abundance of food in front of them and they too hold in their hands the same spoons with long handles, handles so long they cannot manage to feed themselves.

Only these people were *happy and well fed* because they had learned to feed each other. They used the long handles of their spoons to reach across the table, so no one was hungry or in need. This, the man knew was heaven.

The power of this parable is the power the people have to create heaven or hell by their own actions and intentions. The same is true for us.

By being mindful of the love and generosity that draws each of us to come and be nourished at God's table, let's remember that we come here to learn to serve rather than be served. May this inspire us to create round tables in our homes, church, and community, where everyone is welcome, everyone is fed, everyone has a role, everyone has a voice, everyone is valued, and everyone knows they are loved.