

"HOW BIG IS THE TABLE?"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Mark 9: 38 - 41; 10: 13 - 16

// When he was about nine, Thomas Merton, who later in life became a highly respected, spiritual man, built a rickety club house out of scrap wood and cardboard which he and his friends had scrounged from the neighbourhood.

This was an exclusive, secret club - for selected members only.

All others - especially little brothers - were not welcome.

When reflecting on this later in life, Thomas Merton wrote:-

"When I think now of that part of my childhood, I remember my brother John Paul standing in a field, about a hundred yards away from the clump of sumacs where we had built our hut, this little perplexed five-year-old kid in short pants, standing very still, his arms hanging down at his sides, gazing in our direction, as insulted as he is saddened, his eyes full of indignation and sorrow.

'Get out of here,' we shout. 'Beat it! Go home!' But he does not go away.

We fling some little green apples at him, yet he still does not go away.

The law written in his nature says that he must be with his elder brother, and do what he is doing;

and he cannot understand why this law of love is being so wildly and unjustly violated in his case." //

How many of us at one time or another have been that little boy or girl on the outside of the fun, desperately wanting to be included - whether it be the building of a cardboard clubhouse with the other kids, or the pick-up game of baseball in the park, or the sleep-over all the other children seemed to be excited about.

Are there any of us here who do not know what it feels like to be told that we are not welcome, that we do not belong? The pain of isolation, of being cut off, is not unknown to us.

The snapshot Mark offers us today shows the apostle John coming to Jesus on behalf of the other disciples. He says "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." (Mark 9: 38)

Someone who has never joined our club, has never taken the course, has no credentials, is going around invoking your name, so we tried to shut him down, cut him off, keep him out.

The disciples seem to be into "exclusive club" mode.

They are very defensive of the relationship they are sharing with Jesus.

Did you notice that they are even trying to protect Jesus from the children?

"Could you take the kids to the edge of the crowd?" they bark at parents.

"Don't you see that we're trying to listen to some teaching here?"

Instead of saying "Well done, Johnny; we can't just let anybody into our little circle," Jesus says "No, no, no... Do not stop him. He needs to be included because whoever is not against us is for us... And while we are at it, I'd like the children to come from the back, and sit here with me..."

Now wait a minute, Jesus.

Are you saying that *everyone* is welcome? Are there no standards?

And on a Sunday like this, the reaction might even be something like “Do you invite just anyone to come and have supper with you? Just how big is your table anyway, Jesus?”

Occasionally that is our question too, is it not?

Sometimes like those little boys with their exclusive cardboard clubhouse, we are tempted to restrict this meal, however subtly, to those *we* think are worthy to be included.

We have been known to make persons of other ethnic, or racial, or even religious backgrounds feel uncomfortable at the table.

Those with whom we disagree, those who make us angry, those we don't like, may be tolerated around the table, but sometimes the welcome is awkward or a bit cool.

I have known some congregations who treat the Communion Table as if it were their own table.

But friends this is not *our* table. It is rather *our Lord's Table*.

Jesus is our host for the supper, and it is always in his name that we enjoy the privilege of gathering here.

How poignant that is on this one Sunday of the year when Christians in every corner of the world intentionally celebrate our Lord's Supper. “Jesus, just how big is your table anyway?”

Well it is as big as God's heart, as large as the global family of earth...

// Today, thousands of miles to the south of us, in Barrio Argolas, a small group of poor Brazilians in their struggling Methodist Church gathers to break bread, and share the cup.

Today, in the remote two-point Bella Coola pastoral charge – one among many along the British Columbia coast – two United Church congregations, one native, and one of Norwegian descent gather at the Lord's Table.

This morning, in an Anglican monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, my friend Kevin Hackett breaks bread and shares the cup with his spiritual brothers,
and then will head out to continue his work with the street gangs and troubled youth in the dangerous streets of South Boston.

Today I think of Jakob, a young Lutheran pastor whom I got to know at Taize last June, as he shares bread and wine with his congregation in Sweden.

Today, a small congregation in South Korea breaks bread and offers the cup in the street in front of a police station, because their own church has been destroyed by thugs.

Today in Leningrad, 225 Russian Christians will crowd into the only Roman Catholic Church in that city, to share a service in both Russian and Latin, during which the bread will be broken, and the cup raised.

To the accompaniment of trumpeting five-manual pipe organs, or rhythmic Jamaican steel drums, in the holy silence of hospital rooms, or the joyful dance of African villages,
bread will be broken, and the cup shared. In Samoa, Indonesia, the Philippines,
on university campuses, in prison cells, in white frame prairie churches on gumbo roads, and in ornate, gothic, stained-glass cathedrals pungent with incense,
this morning the bread is broken, and the cup is shared. //

How large is the Table? Today we gather with both the powerful and the poor,

the pompous and the persecuted, in every pocket of our earth home.

3.

// May I take you for a moment to Wesley Centre in downtown Hamilton? Since 1955, Wesley has been one of our United Church's outreach projects. The Centre provides daily meals, overnight emergency accommodation, counseling, clothing, and a host of other services for the homeless and the disadvantaged in Hamilton's core.

Many of the congregations in the area take their turn at Wesley once or twice a year, sharing in their Sunday afternoon worship service, and then providing a hot meal for the 250 men, women, youth and children for whom the Centre is a source of nourishment and welcome.

During my years as minister of Port Nelson United Church in Burlington, we always took our Confirmation Class to participate in the worship, and help serve the meal.

In 2002, the Sunday we were assigned as our Wesley Centre day, just happened to be the afternoon of the Gold Medal Men's Hockey Game during the Salt Lake City Olympics - that classic playoff between the U.S. and Canada which you may remember had the whole country buzzing. Needless to say, our teens were not particularly impressed that they were taking part in worship at Wesley at 3 o'clock, just as the hockey game was beginning.

Before the service, Thom Davies, Wesley's Chaplain, warned me that there might not be anyone show up for worship, because they had decided to let the clients into the Centre early, so they could watch the hockey game if they wanted to.

So you had the hockey game downstairs, and the opportunity for worship upstairs.

We went up to the Chapel, and when I walked in, I was surprised to see probably 20 men and women who had gathered for the service. Before we started, Thom said to this group of street folk, "I need to ask you a question, and I want you to give me an honest answer.

We can have long worship today, or short worship. You can choose.

If we have short worship, you can go downstairs and watch the hockey game.

But it will mean that we probably won't have communion today like we usually do.

If we have long worship, we won't be finished until about 4 o'clock when supper is served, and you won't get to see the game. It doesn't matter to us. You decide."

There was a pause. I know the teens in our Confirmation Class were quietly thinking "Short worship! Short worship!" But then one of the Wesley clients said, "Long worship."

And from the other side of the room someone else said, "Long worship." and someone else said, "I really want communion today."

And Thom said, "O.k. We'll do long worship today." //

Now here were men and women of the street.

Some would say they don't belong at the Table, that their opinions really don't matter that much, that their dirty clothes, lack of personal hygiene, all the wrong choices they have made for themselves make them persons who need to have decision made for them - even around whether it is long or short worship on Gold Medal Sunday.

And yet here at Wesley, who they are matters.

For me, the Wesley Centre clients serve as a powerful reminder that the banquet we share here today, is for all of God's children, including all of us here.

Just how big is your table anyway, Jesus?

It is so large that we cannot begin to get our imaginations around it -

as large, and extravagant, and lavish, and welcoming, and forgiving, and unlimited as the
very love of God itself. Thanks be to God! Amen