

I well remember being seated at the "children's table" at extended family dinners as I was growing up. That was fine in the early years. But then came a time when I really wanted to be a part of the adult conversation, and there was no space at the "big table".

Places at the table are very important in many settings. I have experienced another kind of limited space at the table as I have served a variety of congregations over the years. Often that message comes in the form of: "We don't do that here." or "That's not the way we do it." Speakers never intend to exclude anyone from participation. Rather they seek to inform and facilitate joining in. The results vary.

Hospitality takes many forms. When it seems stilted or rehearsed it doesn't feel genuine. Paul in concluding this letter to the Hebrews is emphasizing treatment of others as the way we love our neighbor. Hospitality is more than a formal dinner or grand occasion behavior. It is in the everyday transactions with one another. It is in this daily care for one another that our faith is lived out. Paul is suggesting that these actions express the presence of God to another. That isn't very comfortable at first. However, when one learns that simply stopping by, or providing a ride, or obtaining information for another had made a difference in that life; one feels affirmed --- and is inclined to do it again!

Hospitality is another way of expressing respect for one another. It seems to me that we have lost an expectation of basic respect. Often we hear people saying things to each other that are not nice. In fact they are mean and intended to hurt or put down. That has the effect of returning someone to the children's table. Think before you speak was a rule in my family as I grew up. Often it was coupled with "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Perhaps we could emphasize that a bit more as we live and work together.

Jesus relied on hospitality as he traveled about delivering God's message of grace to his world. It was customary in that time for traveling rabbis - of which Jesus could be considered one - to be invited for the midday meal. A Pharisee might be curious about having conversation with Jesus. Jesus took stock of that situation. He saw two points of separation.

It began with the seating of the guests. He noticed the jockeying for position; individuals seeking a "better place" at the table. He offers guidance: when you enter take your place low on the table and wait for your host to invite you to another place closer to him/her. Jesus is making it clear that we are all equal in God's kingdom. No one has a "better place".

Then he went a step further to emphasize this commonality. This was guidance for being the host. Most of us invite our friends or people we want to get to know better to dinner. Jesus instructs the people to avoid inviting those who will repay with a return invitation. Instead Jesus sends us out to look for those who really need a meal, or special care, or just to be included around the table.

Jesus is talking about the inclusive nature of God's reign - the reign we would all love to experience. In that realm everyone would be included and allowed to contribute. In that realm cooperation and collaboration would be characteristic. We would not be thinking of ourselves as over/against one another. Our efforts to find common solutions would truly be common - that is, they would belong and be claimed by all. We would

celebrate and give thanks for solutions and remedies that developed. We wouldn't have to put each other "back in their place".

How is that possible in our time, our congregation? There was a marvelous example shared in Monday's Mission Yearbook reading.

[[www.presbyterianmission.org/yearbook](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/yearbook)]

Many are dismayed at the state of public discourse in our nation this year. One congregation recognized the fear and uncertainty they felt about Muslims. Conversation with another group led to the presentation of an Interfaith Panel about Christianity and Islam. It was well received. People listened to one another. Questions were answered. They plan to engage further. That is one way of making space at the table.

Next Sunday, we will gather around this table to celebrate communion. On the first Sunday in October we will join most people confessing Jesus Christ as savior in celebrating World Communion. It is a time to join with sisters and brothers of faith and be fed. It is a time of celebrating the ways in which we make God's impact on our lives known. It is a time of lifting new prayers for peace and justice in our world.

In this congregation we will celebrate beginning to discover a new place at the table. We will be fed and encourage one another to reach out to those we love and to those in need of a friend, a helping hand, a word of encouragement, a place to be recognized and share with others. May we be prepared to take our places with joy and compassion as we seek to love all our neighbors all around this world, especially the ones who challenge our belief and practice and do things differently. May we present the face and hand of God to them as we share at this table.