

*God of grace, who invites everyone to your table. Give us the desire and courage to do the same.
Amen.*

October 7, 2018 – Matthew 9:10-13

“An Open Table”

I’ve had many different dinner-table experiences in my lifetime. Some nurtured my soul; others, not so much.

I remember dinnertime experiences growing up. And if my memory serves me well, without fail, it was always at 4:30 p.m. Looking back, that seems a bit early, but that was the time everyone was required to gather for the meal, and there were no other options. The television was turned off while we ate. We could discuss anything that was on our mind, but if anyone lost their temper during the discussion, we were reprimanded and required to finish the meal in silence. Consequently, I remember quite a few quiet meals. And I was required to eat everything on my plate. Again, there was to be no discussion about the matter. I couldn’t get down from the table until the plate had been cleaned. And as a result, meals sometimes lasted hours for me.

The point I’m trying to make is my childhood mealtime experiences had lots of rules, and really didn’t give me an opportunity to express myself. I think a lot of people growing up in the 50s and early 60s probably have similar experiences.

But in time, I moved away to go to college where I met new friends. One of those friends was someone whom I will call “Penny Hebert,” whose hometown was Ville Platte, a Cajun town in the heart of Louisiana. Cajun life is very different than what I had experienced growing up. Cajuns have a *joie de vivre*, which means “joy of life.” And that means they sing; and dance; and drink lots of beer; they eat really, really good food; and they laugh a lot. So when Penny invited me to spend the weekend at her parents’ house, it was an eye-opening experience for me.

And one of the most bizarre and wonderful things I encountered was their open table. Or more accurately, their open kitchen. On top of the stove sat a great big pot of delicious gumbo always simmering away. Neighborhood kids would wander into the house to visit and a bowl of gumbo would be shoved in front of them to eat. Adults would drop by and they would be offered a beer and a bowl of gumbo. And it was around that kitchen table that you were as likely to hear uproarious laughter as you would hear a mother yelling at her child to behave, which often elicited screams of protest and tears from the child.

I suspect that my parents would have been aghast at the kitchen chaos, the come-and-go of folks, some of whom were strangers to the household, but not for long. My parents would have been horrified, but I was enthralled with it all. It was good for my soul.

Our reading from Matthew’s Gospel presents a picture similar to the contrast I’ve just given between my family mealtimes while growing up and the open-kitchen experiences of my friend Penny and her family. Jesus is sitting around having a good ol’ time with his disciples, and it sounds like people joined them in much the same way neighbors made their way into the Hebert kitchen. I wonder if there was a first-century equivalent of gumbo steaming away, attracting what Eugene Peterson’s Gospel translation calls “crooks and riffraff” to their dinner table. I imagine lots of laughter as wine was being passed around. And that’s when the rule-following Pharisees showed up on the scene, quick to critique Jesus and his open table. To which Jesus pointed out that, despite what you saw on the surface, these people were sick and broken, and they needed their spirits mended. And that’s what was really taking place at that table. Broken spirits were being mended.

Troy Perry, the founder of Metropolitan Community Churches, believed in an open table. People who have been excluded usually do. Troy, like other members of the LGBT community, had been excluded from the Christian church. And then one day Troy heard God’s voice urging him to start a church with an open table, one that didn’t exclude people because of who and how they loved, one

where broken spirits could be mended. At first Troy resisted the idea, but finally gave into it, with this morning's contemporary reading offering an account of the very first MCC worship service.

It was an open-table worship service, a service which welcomed everyone. I imagine something like the informal come-and-go Hebert kitchen when I read about that worship service in Troy's living room in Huntington Park, California on October 6, 1968:

I had cleaned out the living room, set up some chairs, used the coffee table for an altar. I had borrowed a robe from the Congregationalist minister that I had helped out previously. He insisted that I had to preach in a robe for that first service. I had borrowed some trays from some very close friends, Steve and his lover, Lynn. These were for communion. I set up everything, and stood in the kitchen... Then, people began to gather. My roommate and dear friend Willie Smith let them in. He greeted them, and saw that they sat down. One friend of ours brought his straight brother and the brother's girlfriend. Other people showed up... There were 12 people in the living room, and I walked out, and asked everyone to stand up, and I said, "We'll go before the Lord in prayer." We joined hands and prayed. Then I said, "We'll sing some hymns." ... Everyone was as scared as I was. They all waited around for me to lead the singing and sing out. So I did. My mother always used to say, "My boys don't sing too well, but they sure sing loud." And that was never more true ... After I finished preaching, I closed my Bible, and I knew that God was in the place. I prayed again, and then I looked up and said, "We're going to have open communion," there wasn't a dry eye in the place... We dismissed with a prayer of benediction. Then I invited everyone to stay for coffee and cake. We gathered and we just couldn't quit crying. We all sat around and said we had felt the spirit of the Lord.

[\(https://www.mccchurch.org/overview/history-of-mcc/\)](https://www.mccchurch.org/overview/history-of-mcc/)

Ever since that first worship service, Metropolitan Community Churches have insisted upon an open table, one in which everyone is welcome, and where broken spirits are mended. It's a table that captures the heart of what Jesus was up to. "Central Texas MCC and all MCC churches scandalously, foolishly, wantonly, celebrate an open communion. Like the sower, we cast our seeds upon all the soil. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, whatever name you call yourself and whatever names you call your God, you are welcome at this table – the heart of Jesus' ministry – because we believe that the gifts of God are for all." I couldn't put it any better than MCC pastor, Rev. Miller Hoffman, who writes:

"What we offer is built on the sure knowledge that there is enough for everyone to have enough. Where we are all valuable and worthy and equally loved and loveable. We're not all the same. We're different ages and colors and body shapes and sizes and we do sexuality in unique ways and some of us are freaking with gender. But we are all valuable and worthy and equally loved and loveable. That's where social differences and inequalities are erased. The part where all of us, whatever we've done in our lives, whatever we've done to one another here in this room, whatever our flaws and mistakes and sins, we are all called to sit together in kinship and share our food, our resources, ourselves with each other – to share who we are and what we have and to give one another our gentleness, our patience, our self-control, our anger dissolved into a kindness that doesn't keep score. That's the part where hard and rigid hearts are softened and opened."

Earlier in today's worship service, as an act of prayer, you were invited to write the names of individuals, groups, and organizations to join us at this open table. But wishful thoughts are empty without action. So in closing, I ask you to consider how you might extend an invitation to that individual, group, or organization you wrote on the card. Pray about it. And then do what God calls you to do. That's what Troy did 50 years ago. And now it's up to us. Amen.