May 29, 2016
John 14:1-2
A Place at the Table: Setting the Table

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 14:1-2 New Revised Standard Version

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.  In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

For the next few weeks we are going to be talking about Communion. I love Communion. I often refer to Communion Sunday as bread and juice Sunday. When my mom married my stepdad he had a 10 year-old son who had not been to church much. My mom brought him to church on a Communion Sunday. Afterwards he said that he really liked church because they gave you snacks. So, I also think of Communion Sunday as snack Sunday.

The Communion table might be the place you met Jesus for the first time. Communion is called the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Great Thanksgiving, or Eucharist. Eucharist comes from the Greek word eucharisteo which mean to give thanks. As we prepare our hearts for Communion today we will say a prayer of thanksgiving as we give God thanks. We will be like a family getting ready for a big meal, and we will all help set the table by saying the words, “The Lord be with you!” “And also with you!” We will say the prayer of thanksgiving as a community, as a family of faith. We will remember and celebrate that it is the Creator who first “set the table” of abundant gifts of which we partake. It is the Creator’s hand that guides, guards and directs us now, as always throughout history.

 In Communion we are united with God and with one another as we take the bread, give thanks, break it, and share it with one another.  We participate in the divine life of Jesus the Christ by sharing life with each other.

Sharing life with each other. Today is Fellowship Lunch Sunday. Church potlucks are the best thing in the entire world. Fellowship Lunch Sundays take a lot of work. We have to get the church ready, set out the tables, set out the chairs, set out the serving tables and the utensils, plates, and napkins. We have to make the lemonade and put out the water pitcher. We have to get out the cart where you put the dirty dishes. For me a church potluck is an example of sharing life together. We have to prepare, we have to help one another, we have to work together. We eat together and talk and learn about what is going on with each other.

But at a potluck lunch I also think of all those who have been a part of the church in the past and have now passed into the life beyond. The wonderful saint of the church who brought the green Jell-O mold. In Communion we fellowship with Jesus, the gathered congregation, the Church universal, and the saints. We celebrate with those who built this sanctuary. We celebrate with those who lived lives of faith singing in the choir and teaching Sunday School. We celebrate with those who died fighting for our country.

Tomorrow on Memorial Day there will be many who will visit cemeteries and clean the graves of loved ones. Many will gather with family for reunions and fellowship and food. We will remember people who came before us. We will think about how they lived their lives, how they struggled to raise their families and how they helped shape our lives today. We don’t stand on our own, indeed, we can’t stand on our own. We are connected to those who came before us and to those who will come after us. In Communion the whole Church, past, present, and future, is tied together in one sacred moment.

Thursday afternoon I received an email from someone who has been a guest here at Greenland Hills. This guest would always come with two other friends and one of those friends ended their life. His name was Kyle and he was also the person who cut my hair. Kyle loved Greenland Hills, but he struggled with feelings of worthiness. The last text that Kyle sent me said “God needs to smile so I can see God’s white smile in this darkness that I feel. I don’t feel God.” There are so many in our world, so many in our neighborhoods, so many in our families, so many in our work and in our circle of friends that are struggling to feel God.

 The scripture that we read this morning is said by Jesus on the last night that Jesus and his disciples would have together as a community, as family. Jesus had just wrapped a towel around his waist, bent down, and washed the dusty feet of his disciples. He washed the feet of the one who would deny him three times, Peter, and the one who would betray him, Judas. For Jesus that is what love looks like, that is what love does for one another, that is what love gives on behalf of each other.

That night as Jesus washed their feet he spoke of hard things. He spoke of his suffering and death and John’s Gospel says Jesus was troubled in spirit. The disciples saw how Jesus went toe-to-toe with the religious leaders and the political leaders. The disciples were hearing the rumors. They saw that their friend was upset. And then Jesus says those words that you often hear at memorial services, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe into God; believe also into me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

The Father’s house is where you find those who care for you and those for whom you are expected to care. The Father’s house is not as much about a space as it is about an identity. It is a homecoming of sorts. This is where you find your home. It is like Jesus is saying, “Look, because of who I am and because of all I am about to do, I am here to tell you that you have a dwelling space in my Father’s house.” Jesus is saying, “Because of who I am and because of all I am about to do, you have a new identity. Jesus is promising, “Because of who I am and what I am about to do, you have this whole new home—one that is in God, God’s very self—a home where you are wanted and received and loved and valued and welcomed fully, no matter what.”

Jesus is saying, “Because in my Father’s house, in God’s household, there are many dwelling places, an overabundance of dwelling places, far exceeding your imagination and expectation. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you . . . and y’all are all invited to come with me and through me and in me to find your home, right here and right now. For where I am, there you may be also.”

 Jesus is promising this new relationship, this new identity in God’s household to the people who were about to betray him, deny him, and abandon him. Jesus was promising this new way of being in the world to those who would soon cower in fear behind locked doors. There are many dwelling places in God’s household and the betrayers and the deniers, those who feel lost and those who feel found, ALL are invited to find their home, to know and to abide in God each and every day, no matter what. And that promise, is nothing but pure grace, extravagant grace, breathtaking grace. We have not earned it, we do not deserve it, we cannot buy it. It is pure gift and it is our reality.

Right here and right now, because of who Jesus our Christ is as God’s love made flesh, we are at home, not just in this church family, but in God. By coming in Jesus, God made a decision to take in firsthand everything about what it means to be human, even brokenness, suffering, death, so that we would trust that nothing we do or experience is outside of God’s presence. So we would see and know and feel that no matter what, we are at home in God’s household, right here, right now. And furthermore, we have been given a new people, each other. A new family for whom we are to care and who will care for us. Yet that new family is not just the people in this place. Our people are all of God’s people.

I wonder who needs to know that God loves them? Who needs to know that they are a beloved child of God? To whom are we being called to share this good news of God’s hospitality for all people? Who would be set free by knowing that no matter what, they are at home in God even when, especially when, the shadows have grown thick and trouble is all they know? The world is hungry for this news.

We are hungry for this news. There are days when it is hard for us to trust and believe that we have a place in God’s family. We may have it all together on the outside while feeling like we are playing dress-up on the inside. We may want to live a faithful life but feel pulled in all directions. We may feel like things are going well in our world, like we are doing what God hopes we will do. We may feel like we can no longer lift our head because our hope has drained out and faith feels like an old dream. We may need to be reminded that we are at home, fully loved, fully claimed, fully known.

May we trust that promise for ourselves and then spread that welcome and that homecoming out from beyond this space so that all people might find their home here. May we all know that we are already at home in the One whose household has many dwelling places.

Communion is a visible reminder of God’s claim on our lives. It is a reminder of God’s presence and God’s love for us. We may feel alone, we may be wracked with guilt, we may think that we have done some pretty awful things in our life. I know that I feel like I have. Communion reminds me that I am loved and forgiven. Communion reminds us that we are loved and forgiven. Jesus shares in John 6, “I am the bread of life.  Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Come meet Jesus in the bread. The table is set. Amen.