

The Healing Table
 Matthew 9:9-13
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Welcome to Communion Sunday and the healing table of Jesus. Over the years, the healing power of faith has become Christianity's best-kept secret—not to the poor who have little or no access to the medical care that many of us take for granted. And not to Christians who obsessively look to the bible for guidance and direction; and not to the numerous evangelists who market their gifts as faith healers.

Even so the image of Jesus as physician has been replaced in the minds of most Christians by the dramatic persona of Jesus, the Judge, and Jesus the end-time deliverer who heals by the sword of righteousness. So much so that Jesus' humanity, not his divinity has become a blockage to the faith of many. It has become easier to reject what others believe about Jesus and fashion a shadow faith that has little or no connection to the realness of his person and his earthly ministry.

This morning I'd like us to take another look at Jesus the physician and see the simple yet profound manner of his healing ways. To do that we need to recognize that the essence of Jesus' ministry was an ordinary act of hospitality made extraordinary by its simplicity. Jesus gathered people around a table, not a cross, into an atmosphere of welcome not condemnation, and into a force field of acceptance, love, and joy.

It's a shame, but you won't see reality TV producers gathering people around a kitchen table any time soon, if ever... why not? Because, the drama at the table would showcase acceptance not rejection. Participants would not care to vote someone out because they would be having too much fun inviting people in. They would also be the first to tell you that the energy spent getting to know someone as they really are, without the backbiting competition necessary to undermine someone's place at the table, is the ultimate reward. No matter how small the table—there's room for every one. That's reality programming at its best. There is simply no substitute for places and spaces where welcome flourishes and acceptance heals.

Matthew sets the Pharisees up as the fall guys who don't get it. They don't understand why Jesus flouts the laws of purity and eats with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus in turn reminds them that mercy—acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion—is the true nature of God...I desire mercy not sacrifice. Jesus knew how to open the heart of another, not to close it.

Ironically, as Christianity developed it followed the imperial path of the Roman emperor and chose sacrifice over mercy. The primary consequence of such a path was the church's turn to the cross as a symbol of power...rather than the table. When the cross is at the center of our faith, Jesus says deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me...when the table is the center Jesus simply says follow me, as he did to Matthew. Hear that? Two simple words "Follow me!"

There are plenty of churches that will preach the way of the cross as the way of faith...and there are plenty of Christians who will tell you that the cross has healed them and made them whole. I don't doubt that healing has taken place for them. I would remind all of us though that God's love is for the world, not for the church. Any church that forgets this is simply missing the point. Healing is not about wholeness or cure...its about *oneness*. Healing that stops short of oneness and focuses on personal salvation is simply a way station on the road of faith.

The imperial church, the one shaped by the emperor Constantine is very much present in today's world. This is the church that touts the cross, and the death of Jesus as signs of salvation, and the entry point to heaven. They preach a welcome that feels good to those on the inside, but denies life to those on the outside. Alice Walker once penned "The Welcome Table" a short story of a black woman's experience with an all-white church that decided to remove her from the premises when she showed up one morning and had the nerve to come in and sit in the back pew.

Walker suggests she was old and frail, perhaps close to dying. Still the good folks of the church had the ushers pick her up and deposit her back outside. The story builds on the phrase from a spiritual that says, “I’m going to sit at the Welcome table, shout my troubles over, walk and talk with Jesus, Tell God how you treat me, One of these days!”

The good folks inside the church kept on doing what they do on Sunday morning and never spoke of the “situation” again. Out on the steps, the old woman settled herself and looked up; when she did she became excited and joyful because she saw Jesus walking towards her. She smiled and heard him say, “Follow me.” So she did. She also recounted her experience in the church, but Jesus smiled at her and kept walking. Those who later found her dead on the road wondered what had happened. It seemed she had walked herself to death. More likely she walked herself to life...a life at the Welcome Table, where no one could mistreat her again.

Another perspective on what we do here on communion Sundays is found in the story of a distressed person who came to a Master healer for help. “Do you really want a cure,” the Master asked? ... “If I do not would I bother to come,” the man replied? “Oh yes,” the Master answered, “Most people do.” “What for?” he asked. “Not for a cure. That’s too painful. They come for relief.”

Are you here for relief today, or are you ready for a cure?

If you do want a cure...not for wholeness but for Oneness, you must give up the notion that God and you are separate. Life is about communion, acceptance, and welcome. God and I is one reality and that is the reality of this table

I encourage you to make it your reality too. Let this table... this welcome table... be a healing table for your deepest wounds and darkest secrets for this we know and this we preach...there is nothing neither life nor death, nor sin that can separate us from the love of God we find in the heart of Jesus and at the heart of this table. Amen.