

Table Love, May 7, 2006

Dr. June Goudey

Psalm 23

23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

1 John 3: 17 & 18

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

For those of you who have perused the bulletin and seen the title of my sermon, let me assure you that I am not about to present an *ode to tables*. Resurrection continues to be the context for my post Easter reflections. The table I refer to is this morning's communion table...and the primary focus is love. ...love, love, love as the Beatles would say. Here's the bottom line: in a post Easter world, resurrection power is the key to faith and active love is the key to understanding resurrection power. I've been talking about the power of resurrection in a variety of ways since Easter Sunday. Last week I focused on resurrection hope and had the audacity to say that resurrection hope is the only hope worth having.

In a world where most Christians pin their hopes on heaven, I would argue that heaven is not a destination but a state of being. Heaven is the experience of God's love that all of us are capable of knowing—feeling in our bodies—here and now. Resurrection hope means that life becomes the focus of your hope not heaven. If heaven is a destination in your mind, not a here and now reality, then life becomes something to endure. When that happens fear is the focus of your life not love.

Rather than endure life and hope for something better later, I believe that we are here to create life. Resurrection hope allows us to create and re-create our lives in God's presence every day. It's easy to get caught up in semantics when we talk about faith, hope, and love...we think they are nouns in a sentence. Period! Faith, hope, and love are more than nouns they are *powers*. Powers of expression that gather the energies of the very thing they name.

The power of faith is the power of belief... the power of resurrection faith is the belief that life is stronger than death, that death cannot hold us for long and that when we choose life the renewal of life happens. The power of resurrection hope involves our ability to not just choose life, but to stay the course. If despair knocks, if depression appears, if disaster comes courting, we have the power to say no and to keep saying no as long as we need to ride out the storm, or to walk through the valley of death, and emerge on the safe side of faith.

Love is the power to act one another into well-being. Resurrection love is the power of compassion. When we look at the world through the eyes of resurrection love we realize that life involves interconnection. We cannot create well-being on our own because well-being is a communal affair... Remember Paul's words, when one suffers all suffer, when one rejoices, all rejoice. [The following colored sections represent online research.]

“Early in [Dostoevsky's] *The Brothers Karamazov*, a wealthy woman asks a [Holy Man] how she can really know that God exists. The Staretz tells her that no explanation or argument can achieve this, only the practice of “active love.”

He assures her that really there is no other way to know God in reality rather than God as an idea. The woman confesses that sometimes she dreams about a life of loving service to others — she thinks perhaps she will become a Sister of Mercy, live in holy poverty and serve the poor in the humblest way.

It seems to her such a wonderful thought. It makes tears come to her eyes. But then it crosses her mind how ungrateful some of the people she is serving are likely to be. They will probably complain that the soup she is serving isn't hot enough or that the bread isn't fresh enough or the bed is too hard and the covers too thin. She confesses to Staretz Zosima that she couldn't bear such ingratitude — and so her dreams about serving others vanish, and once again she finds herself wondering if there really is a God. To this the Staretz responds with the words, “Love in practice is a hard and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.””

“In his youth, Dostoevsky was involved with radical politics. He was arrested, condemned to death, and went so far as to be chained to the execution post, when his sentence was commuted to imprisonment in Siberia. His only book in prison was the New Testament. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, he wrote, “Strive to love your neighbors actively and indefatigably. And the nearer you come to achieving this love, the more convinced you will become of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul.”

Without an awareness of active love, resurrection power remains a mystery. Active love is not romantic love; active love is love that extends hospitality. As Christians our most powerful expression of love is table love...the fellowship we share when we receive the bread and cup that Jesus offers us in God's name. When we welcome one another and share communion love is surely present; but when we go out of our way to welcome the stranger and the outcast to this table, active love unleashes a “hospitality of the heart” that transforms those we welcome as well as our own lives.

When the well-being of those we welcome becomes as important as our own well-being active love, resurrection love is at work. Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Workers Movement, understood the importance of active love. She once wrote, “Nothing we achieved was ever our doing; it was only God's mercy passing through us. Our own love wasn't our love. If we experienced love for another person, whether wife or child or friend or enemy, it was God's love. “If I have accomplished anything in my life,” she said late in her life, “it is because I wasn't embarrassed to talk about God.”

How about you? Is God an embarrassment rather than a presence? Can you make your experience of God an extension of God's love in the world and share it, in the words of Bishop Jack Spong, wastefully? One's ability to love wastefully comes from one's capacity to know that what you give away grows as you give it. Active love is love multiplying itself. Tolstoy talked about love this way:

“Love is life. All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love. Everything is, everything exists, only because I love. Everything is united by it alone. Love is God, and to die means that I, a particle of love, shall return to the general and eternal source.”

Heaven is not a destination; it’s a state of being. Of being aware that you and I are creatures of love, formed out of the very substance of God. We love not because God loves us and gave his son to suffer and die for us. We love because love is the essence of our humanity. To be human is to love, to extend the hospitality of heart that allows our God connections to flourish. Wherever love is present so too is God.

Active love, unlike love in dreams requires labor and fortitude. Love requires labor because it has to create the context to make a difference in a world of competing forces. Love in dreams keeps the focus on the dreamer, not the loving itself. Love in action keeps the focus on the loving process. John asks a critical question: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Then he issues a call to commitment: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

In the same way, the table God sets in the 23rd Psalm speaks of active love. Jesus’ most profound teaching has to do with loving our enemies. In the face of terrorism and other atrocities, many of us would prefer to ignore these words and take up arms. Yet even here table-truth confronts us:

Even though I walk through the valley of death,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Whenever we adopt a bunker mentality, the notion of a table prepared “in the presence of my enemies” consoles our weariness. God becomes a one sheep shepherd rather than one who watches over an entire flock or herd. Yet imagine with me the deeper truth at work here. Our enemies are at the table not to witness to our bounty but to share in it. The wonder is not that they have come to this table but that God is the host.

Our response-ability as disciples of Jesus isto love rather than hate, to heal rather than blame, to reconcile—restore relation—and to resist the disconnecting power of fear that threatens the very life of the world that God so loves.

As someone wisely observed, Love is only as good as the lover. When fear orders the lover, disconnection abounds. When love is freed from the power of fear, compassion abounds

In many churches today, people will be called to Communion by the “Good Shepherd” who lays down his life for his sheep. At the heart of that message will be fear. The table will appear to be a table of hospitality but in reality it will be a table of exclusion. Recently the World Council of Churches met in Porto Allegre Brazil. Our Conference was represented by Jane Heckles, one of our Conference ministers and Petra Malleis- Steinbergh, the Pastor of San Bernardino UCC. This past Tuesday they shared stories about the powerful worship experiences of the assembly. Ironically the 3700 participants

gathered from all over the world could share many things but the one thing they could not share as a gathered community was the sacrament of communion. Love of God brought them together, but doctrinal fear kept them from the table. Where the table was present, not everyone could be present. Each went to the table of their own making, a table not constructed by God's love, but a love constructed in their own image.

Table love steeped in resurrection power and active love, says, "Ya'll come." What God does at this table is more important than what our various ecumenical bodies say this table means. When the table at which we gather celebrates the resurrecting power of God, what we eat is not sacred, what we say is not sacred, but what we do is sacred. Today we gather to proclaim God's resurrecting love, a love that practices hospitality to everyone without distinction. A love that says all are worthy, all are welcome; All of us, no matter how lost we have become, can find our way back to God's presence at this table. Table Love! There's nothing like it. So when you find it keep it. I promise you, that if you do, God will keep you always. Amen.