

## MAKING ROOM AT THE TABLE

*Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!*

*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

1 Corinthians 11:17-26 NRSV

*When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

Luke 14:7-14 NRSV

It was about five a.m. and after a night of restless sleep I was fully awake. I knew that later the same day I would probably be making a decision that would change my life and that of my family. I knew that I was facing one of those rare occurrences in life when a

person stands on a knife's edge and which ever way he or she steps nothing would ever be the same again. I lay there in my hotel bed watching the sun peek through the curtains and I pondered the questions before me.

Assuming they wanted me (and it was looking pretty good), did I want to be the next minister of First Christian Church of St. Joseph, Missouri? I had already switched denominations once when I left the Baptist world I was raised in and became a minister in the United Church of Christ. Did I want to change again, even to one as close to the UCC as the Disciples of Christ? (A friend of mine likes to call such a switch of churches being "denominationally promiscuous.") Would I be happy at First Christian? Would I be fulfilled? Would I be allowed to be myself? Was I the right minister for them? Did I have what they needed? Would it be a church where grace flowed freely, especially towards people who have been ostracized by other churches or would it be like so many other churches I had experienced, a place that talks about grace but uses religion to beat people up? Most importantly had I seen enough of this church to risk moving my family halfway across the country? After all, I was in a good situation in New York. Nothing and no one was forcing me out—quite the opposite. I was looking because I felt a pull of my soul towards being a pastor and being closer to my family. I could always wait for another opportunity. This was the first church I had interviewed at. What if something better lay just over the horizon?

As I have done the few times in my life when I faced decisions that would change my life, I got out of bed and went out for a walk, even though it was chilly and the morning shadows were long. I walked out the front door of the downtown Holiday Inn, and not really knowing where I was going, I started walking. I saw a church steeple and thought it looked like a good landmark. I made for it and on my way I passed two men talking. I stopped at a corner to wait for one car and then another to pass. The two men parted ways and one of them joined me on the corner. As we waited for the few cars to pass on an otherwise deserted street, he laughed and turned to me saying, "It must be rush hour." I laughed too.

He said, "My wife and I always laugh and call it the St. Joseph rush minute."

I laughed again and said, "I'm thinking about moving here and this level of traffic sounds like a good fit."

He smiled and replied, "I was born and raised in St. Joseph. I went in the service and traveled all over the world, but I still came back here." He pointed back towards the man he'd been talking to, "That's my brother. He did the same thing. I wouldn't live anywhere else."

I told him that his endorsement meant a lot to me, and he got in his truck and drove away. Then I looked around quickly to see if I could find any evidence of him being a plant by First Christian Church.

I kept walking towards that church steeple and ended up walking past the downtown churches—Episcopal, Presbyterian, Full Gospel, UCC and I found myself at the corner of Faraon and Tenth streets looking at the First Christian Church. I stood across the street from the steps and doors to the narthex just staring. I was trying to figure out if the building would tell me something. Could I see myself coming there every day? Preaching there every Sunday? What would my name look like on the sign at the corner?

As I stood there staring, I noticed out of the corner of my eye someone walking down Tenth street towards me. It was an African-American woman. I smiled at her in greeting and went back to staring at the church. She came right up to me and stopped. She looked where I was looking and then she looked at me. “Why are you sitting there staring at that church?” she asked bluntly.

I turned to her and said, “I’m thinking about moving here to become that church’s new minister.”

“Oh, you should do it. That’s a good church. When I was in the hospital, I came there a few times. It was nice. They used to have an AA meeting there a long time ago. Where do you live now?”

“New York.”

“I used to know some people from New York. That’s a long way away. Why you want to move here?”

“I’m from Kansas City. I’ve got family here.”

“Oh, you should move here. New York’s a long way away.”

She told me again that First Christian was a good church and that when she went to church she usually went to a different one whose name I can’t remember. She added, “Though it doesn’t really matter which church you go to just as long as you go. Just as long as you’re in the Lord’s house. That’s what matters.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Gloria.”

“Well, Gloria, my name is Chase. If I come here and become the pastor of this church, I want you to come here and visit me on Sunday. Look for my name on the sign.”

“Okay, I just might do that,” she answered while looking down at my feet. “I like your shoes.” Then she kept walking to wherever she had been going at 6:30 in the morning in downtown St. Joseph.

Gloria? Wasn't there something somewhere about messengers from God saying "Gloria"? I walked back to the Holiday Inn to get ready for more interviews, as I did so; I wondered whether God had just answered some of my questions.

So there you have it. You now know who gave me the last little push over that knife's edge to want to become the minister at First Christian Church, (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO. I wish I could tell you who to thank (or blame): a former soldier who is white, has a graying beard and drives a pickup truck, and an African American woman named Gloria—both of whom have no problem talking to strangers early in the morning that they meet on the street.

I've thought a lot about these two people and that morning over the past months. I've wondered if they showed up on some Sunday would they be welcome here. It might not be so hard to welcome the first unnamed gentleman. He seemed to have a lot in common with folks in this church I've gotten to know. I'm a little less certain about Gloria, however. She was a different skin color than most folks here, and by the way she was dressed, I'm guessing that she was of a different economic status. Also, she knew a bit about AA, and alcoholism is something many churches still do not want to go near. My hunch is that First Christian Church would welcome both people no matter how alike or different they were from the folks already here. You could say that I bet an awful lot on my hunch concerning your warm hospitality.

I certainly have come to know your hospitality firsthand. Your welcome has been humbling. Church members came to our house and unpacked boxes and moved furniture. Folks keep showing up every other day with delicious home-cooked meals—they just keep coming! (The search committee did not mention these great dinners as a part of the minister's package, but there's been so much, I'm beginning to wonder if we'll ever have to cook again.) Gift baskets continue to pop up. Folks have not blinked about giving me free rides while I'm still recovering from eye surgery. On top of all this, there have been hugs and handshakes aplenty, along with smiles a mile wide. I'm beginning to think you were glad the Peoples family finally made it.

There's a honeymoon period that exists when a new minister comes to a church. It's all lovey-dovey for a while, but eventually the honeymoon is over and you've got to agree upon whether the toothpaste will be squeezed from the end or from the middle. No one can stay on their best behavior forever, not even at church, and the rough edges of the church and minister show through. At that point, both parties have to figure out how to live together. If both minister and church can get their acts together, then in the messy reality of life together the really good stuff of God can occur. If not, well...there are plenty of examples of the "if not's".

When I came here to interview last September. I asked many of you two questions: Why did you become a member of First Christian and why have you remained a member of First Christian? The answer, almost always, was something in the order of "First Christian is like family." It was almost as if you all had prepared answers—or maybe you really feel that way about your church.

Although a church is not a family by biology, we often call churches families. Also, a church is not a home, but we often refer to it as a home in terms of a place where we belong. When new people arrive at a church, whether it is the minister or a visitor, there is a certain sense that they are like a houseguest. It's an interesting thing to have houseguests, whether they be family, friends or acquaintances. Most of the time, it's fun to have them for a while, but there comes a time when you as the host have to decide whether to treat them as guests who have overstayed their welcome or as family. I've known families that were insular and that never allowed people to really join them in terms of intimacy (not even through marriage); outsiders remained outsiders. I've also known families, however, that always had room for one more whenever someone was in need. Churches can be the same way.

Making room for new people, however, takes work. A great example of this occurs at meal time. To make another place at the table, everybody has to adjust their seats. More food has to be made. Everyone has to get used to how this new person acts around the table. Do they pass to the right or left? Do they talk over other people or are they a good listener? Do they help with the dishes? Do they say, "excuse me" when they burp? All of these things have to be negotiated. The negotiation differs depending on whether or not the new person at the table is a guest or is family—whether or not you're family by blood. A guest you can give subtle or not so subtle hints that they are no longer welcome or you can even just not invite them back. Family? Well, except in the most extreme circumstances, you try to live with family. Of course, the payoff for making room for people around the table is the joy of new conversation and new life.

There was another thing said to me repeatedly when I interviewed—every time I gathered with a group of church members it was the first question asked of me—"We're a church that is growing smaller in membership. What are your plans to grow the church?" You may remember my answer: "I don't have any plans, at least not yet." I sensed some disappointment, as if some folks were hoping I had the magic formula. I don't. I simply don't believe in one size fits all church growth strategies. There are as many ways to go about it as there are churches. Besides, the question "How will First Christian Church grow?" is far less important to me than the questions: "Does First Christian Church want to grow?" and "Does First Christian Church want to be faithful?"

These seem like absurd questions—"Of course we want to grow and to be faithful." An emphatic "yes" seems like the logical response. Hear me out before you give that answer.

All churches say they want to grow in numbers, but in my experience most really do not want to do so. Growth means change and change is difficult. Making room at the table means inconvenience and preparation. Letting more people in means sharing and as any toddler can tell you sharing is sometimes hard. Growth in numbers means having to let more voices have a say in what is going on and that means giving up some control. Giving up control means giving up power and even when it is power within a church, power is a hard thing to give up.

The realization that growing means giving up power naturally leads to the next question: “Does First Christian Church want to be faithful?” We worship a God that in Christ sought to give up power and control for the sake of people like you and me. Paul says that Christ took the form of a servant even though he held the power over all creation. If we are to be faithful—truly a “Christian” church and truly “disciples of Christ,” we too must be in the business of giving up power and control for the sake of those in need of the saving grace of God.

When I came in September, someone asked me if I was going to mess with communion. Would I still let lay people serve it? Would I still have it every week? And so on. I think my answer to whether or not I would mess with communion was “HECK NO.” (I think I might have wanted to use even stronger language.) Messing with communion in a Disciples church is a good way to make a ministry short-term, if you get my meaning. Besides, I like communion. I like it enough to do it every week. I like that you like communion even more and that the ritual provides comfort, meaning and identity. When I first entered this sanctuary, I was taken aback by its beauty and what a worshipful place it is. Most of all, I was taken by the fact that the communion table sits at the center of this sanctuary. It is the focal point of all that happens. It is a beautiful table for us to spiritually and physically gather around as a community. I thought to myself, “I think I could worship in this place.”

Jesus seemed to like sitting around the table with people he treated like family. I’ve heard it said that in Luke’s Gospel especially—the Gospel we read from this morning—Jesus is either going to a table, at a table, or coming from a table. It is no wonder that the symbolism of sharing a meal together would become one of the central acts of Christian worship. Yet, he often got into trouble for who he sat around the table with.

A rock band I happen to like is Dave Matthews Band. On one of their early albums, they have a rather remarkable song. It’s called simply “Christmas Song” and it’s remarkable because it is a beautiful song about Jesus written by someone that to my knowledge is not a Christian. There’s a line in it that encapsulates the Gospel and for that matter what we do when we gather for the Lord’s Supper:

So I’m told, so the story goes  
The people he knew were  
Less than golden hearted  
Gamblers and robbers  
Drinkers and jokers, all soul searchers  
Like you and me

As we read this morning, Jesus gave instructions on how to draw up your list of dinner invitations—at least to the kind of dinners to be held by his followers: “*invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*” Invite the people who cannot repay you, huh? Better not read this passage around pledge time.

These are hard instructions. We are taught in our culture, despite our supposed egalitarian values, that all may be created equal but all do not remain equal. Those who live well and work hard will succeed and those who do not succeed...well, they must not have lived well or worked hard enough. The example of Jesus proves the fallacy in such thinking. He lived well and worked hard but did not succeed by any earthly standards. His table guests also did not measure up to any earthly standards of success or high class.

It's no wonder that the early Christians got this Lord's Supper thing wrong just like Christians today do. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians—in the passage we read today, the passage from which we get our language commonly used during communion—Paul comes down hard on them for how they were conducting this important ritual. Some were getting drunk while others were going hungry—what was going on in that church?

Those early believers did not meet in a church building—there were none. They gathered in someone's home and they did more than what we do in our services. They ate an actual meal together. Yet, there was a class struggle at work. Those who arrived first ate their meals without waiting for the rest and without saving any for them. Those who arrived first were wealthy enough to take off work early or not work at all. Those who worked longer hours were lower on the totem pole and most likely had less to share. By the time they arrived, the food was gone and the party was already over. It was basic bad manners. Those with the means did not wait to eat until after everyone was served. As Paul says, the wealthier church members chose to “*humiliate those who have nothing.*”<sup>1</sup>

My hope and my prayer is that First Christian Church of St. Joseph, MO will seek to grow through being faithful. Faithfulness means making room at the table for people even if they can give you nothing in return. Faithfulness means making room at the table even if it means being inconvenienced. Faithfulness means giving up power and control in order to serve. I believe First Christian can have that kind of faithfulness, because you already have demonstrated it in the past. I believe it strongly enough that I've chosen to move my family here and to become your minister.

I have no plan for church growth, but I do have a plan for faithfulness. My vision for this church is that it will become known as THE church in town that always has a place at the table for those who are not welcome anywhere else. I want it known that at First Christian there is a place set for you regardless of your skin color, regardless of your gender, regardless if English is not your first language, regardless of your nationality, your politics, your successes or failures, your sexual orientation, your annual income—regardless of whatever it is that people use to judge other people. My hope is that people will know First Christian is the church where if you are present you are welcome at the table.

This week I gave my first invitation to someone to visit our church. I met a man and we got to talking about church. He told me that he had been a member of a particular church for a long time. His children were raised and baptized there. He and his wife divorced and his son went with her to a different church where he was eventually confirmed. One

Sunday this man and his son went together to the first church where he still attended. The time in the service came for communion and they went forward to receive it. When the man's son came forward, he was told he could not take it due to the fact that he had been confirmed at a different church. This man told me with real emotion about how much that hurt him. Even though his son had been raised in that church and baptized there, he had been refused communion. There was no place at the table for him. Despite meetings with the minister and church leaders, his son still cannot take communion, so the man I spoke with no longer goes there and no longer has a church.

I explained to him that at our church we practice open communion and that neither he nor his son would ever be refused communion. I invited him to visit. We'll see if he and his children come. I believe we will make room at the table for them—and not just them but everyone like them who has ever felt that they did not have a place set for them in church. Let's spread the word that we have made room at the table for all who wish to come.

Rev. Chase Peebles  
Fifth Sunday After Epiphany, February 4, 2007  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

### **PRAYER**

Loving Creator, you are the host at the feast we call life. You have welcomed us into your presence and sat us in a place of honor around your table. We do not deserve such hospitality. Help us to gather together as a community with humility and gratitude for all you have given to us. Having received the grace of inclusion, help us to include others who remain at the margins, ignored and uncared for. Make us a part of setting your table and making room for all who would come to you seeking peace, wholeness, forgiveness and love. Fill us with life as we seek to worship you and to be renewed for service to others. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent study of the social situation of the Corinthian Church and the dynamics referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, see Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, Ed. And Trans. John Schutz (Philadelphia: Philadelphia, 1982).