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Scripture: Table Talk – Looking at Hospitality

I was participating at an event a few months ago and the facilitator invited us all to do an activity as a bit of an ice breaker. He handed out big pieces of paper and a marker and then instructed us to draw a floor plan of the homes that we were raised in.

He then asked us to consider the room in that home that was most significant to us in our growing up years. He gave us about ten minutes to ponder and to draw. My parents had the home I was raised in built for them in 1969 in the Stanley Park area of Kitchener. It was a basic two story, 4 bedroom, two bathroom, single car garage on a Cul de Sac.

I lived there from the time I was 6 years old until I moved away at 19 to go to school right here in London at Western. I was fortunate. My home was my refuge. My parents made it a safe and loving place. Not everyone has that. For some of you here in this room, your family home was not a safe place and this exercise may be more difficult for you.

As I began to draw, I started with the front entranceway, then the living room, the kitchen, then dining room and the back bathroom, towards the stairs going to the basement. I then sketched out the basement, where the TV was and moved to the upper floor, where our bedrooms were located. The truth is, I could have pick any number of rooms in this home that were filled with wonderful memories.

The basement was where our family would gather, watch our favourite TV shows. Friday night, Partridge Family, Brady Bunch. Do you remember when your favourite shows were on a certain night and you actually had to wait a week to watch the next episode. Not like today with binge watching on Netflix.

I could have chosen my bedroom. It was a haven for me, decorated with my favourite things, posters,

magazine covers and my stereo. It was a wonderful place. I could have chosen the living room with the piano. It is where we gathered when company came over. Sometimes even having a sing song.

I could have chosen the backyard where we had a swimming pool. There were many good times with family and friends around that pool. But, I didn't choose to highlight any of those things, no I picked the dining room.

In my younger years, the kitchen and the dining room were two separate places divided by a wall. Six days a week, we would have our meals as a family in the kitchen but on Sunday night, that all changed. Sunday night's dinner was always held in the dining room. The table was set with the fine china and sterling silver that came from a special box. The linen table cloth was spread over the wooden table which did add a little stress as a boy, struggling not to spill.

The Sunday night meal of my childhood was always the same, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Delicious. There was something about our meal together as a family in the dining room on Sunday nights. It seemed like through-out the week in the kitchen, things were a little more hustled and chaotic. Everyone coming and going, but on Sundays in the dining room, everything just seemed to slow down. There was time for stories and sharing, getting caught up on the highlights of the week. There was much laughter and a few tears around that table.

The dining room table was where we invited guests, friends and neighbours. It was where we had family celebrations, birthdays and anniversaries and special meals like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. There was a lot of tradition practiced around the dining room table.

It is funny, that after I moved out of the house, my parents knocked down the wall that divided the kitchen and dining room to open things up a bit. Once they did that, there was no more dining room. Just one large expanded kitchen. Things were not quite the same after that...there was something special about that dining room. Being around a table, good food, good people and good conversations.

Maybe some of you have the same experiences around the table. And I am aware that many of you perhaps have not, I am sorry for that.

Today we launch a new message series at North Park. Our summer series entitled *Table Talk* and we will be preaching and teaching about food. One of my favourite topics. How can you go wrong with that?

Food matters. Not just for our daily nourishment and sustenance but meals are full of significance. Just think of some of the most important events or occasions of your life. I would be willing to bet that many of them occurred around food or were celebrated with food.

My son, DJ graduated from Western last week and although the ceremony was riveting as we listened to 500 names read out and we watched each one of those names walk across the stage, the highlight was actually going out afterwards as a family and celebrating all my son's hard work over food.

Those of you who are in the midst of planning a wedding, know that much of the time and expense of the day goes into the meal. As we were planning our daughter's wedding four years ago, we were invited to attend a taste testing event put on by the caterer we were considering. It was as close to heaven as I have ever experienced. Table upon table of food laid out and I could taste anything. I could even eat dessert first if I wanted, and I think I did.

Of course, I paid for it afterwards. In more ways than one, but at the time it was glorious and we selected a very good meal to celebrate Leah and Brad's marriage.

I remember when I asked Carolyn's dad's permission to marry her. I had to first butter him up, so I did what any nervous young guy would do

when wanting a favourable response from an older German man.

I took him to Café Mozart. At the time, the finest European bakery in all of Kitchener Waterloo. As I was plying him with Streusel kuchen (crumb cake) and Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte (Black Forest Cake), I wore him down, until he had no choice but to say yes.

See that's the power of good food. You would give your daughter away to a 21 year-old, broke student for a piece of delicious pastry. Dads beware of the wily tactics of your daughter's suitors. To those of you who are dating our daughters, we've got our eyes on you.

There are few acts more meaningful of friendship and relationship than a shared meal. Someone with whom we share food is likely to be a friend or on the way to becoming a friend. It is interesting to note that the word, "companion" comes from the Latin, "com panis" meaning "with or together with bread". A companion is literally someone we come together with, around bread.

For the past few years, the small group that Carolyn and I are a part of, have met every few weeks to study God's word and to pray but we start our time together with a meal. Sometimes just simple like soup and buns, or maybe pizza, other times more elaborate with meat and potatoes. But we have gotten to know each other better around the table which has deepened our relationships and our care and concern for one another.

Just think about some of your favourite memories around a table. This dining room table I have here, belonged to Carolyn's Oma and Opa. They had it for over 50 years. It sat in the dining room of their home that was located on the same street as the house I was raised in. I have many fond memories of sitting around that table with Carolyn's family. Celebrating special events. Carolyn's Oma was a fabulous cook. Her meat loaf made in a cast iron skillet was exquisite.

I still remember the way Carolyn's Opa started his grace every time. *Our rich and gracious heavy father, we praise your name....* It's a memory. He's been gone for 30 years.

What were/ are your memories? Around the table? It's just a simple piece of furniture. What dramas have played out for you around the table? What stories have been told, what values have been imparted to you around the table? What guests have been welcomed? What people have found a home around your table? What important decisions have been made at the table? What tears have been shed? When has reconciliation been offered at the table?

What goofy, silly things have connected your family at the table? A number of years ago, a spontaneous gesture at our family's Christmas meal led to a "tradition" that lasted for years. As my older sister was leaning over her piece of pumpkin pie (with whipped cream on top), I couldn't resist, I may have pushed the back of her head, propelling her face into the whipped cream. That started a food fight in the dining room, much to my mother's chagrin, sending whipped cream and pumpkin pie everywhere.

For many years after, at the family Christmas meal as the dessert arrive, everyone had to be on their toes, to see who would get the whip cream in the face that year. I am not recommending or sanctioning this activity but it did create a memory that we still laugh about. Do you have some of these memories from your table?

Food connects. It connects us with family. It can turn strangers into friends and it can connect people around the world. I have had the privilege to travel a little bit with mission teams around the globe. I have been to some of the poorest regions of the world and in each place, I have experienced community and connection with fellow Christians around the table.

In the rainforest region of Northern Nicaragua, despite their meagre existence, the village welcomed us with a feast of chicken to go with the standard fare of rice and beans, quite a gesture of hospitality and love.

I have travelled to the furthest inhabitable regions of the Northern Philippines, to a mountain top town with no electricity. The people feted us with roasted pig that had been carried on spits by two men, six kilometers up the mountain trail from the nearest village in the valley. Just so that we could feast together and connect with the whole village!!

I have gathered around a community table in the politically and economically oppressed city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Africa where the church literally killed a beast (cow) in our honour and we feasted on it together and gave praise to God for his provision and faithfulness even under a dark cloud of uncertainty.

And I have been part of a community gathering that served and ate pizza, lots of pizza with 150 orphans at Pan de Vida, Mexico where the joy and laughter of children filled the air as they praised God for their daily bread, pizza crust.

Food connects, it even breaks through language and culture barriers as hospitality is extended and relationships are birthed and developed, at the table.

Unfortunately, we know that food and hospitality can also have a dark side. Nothing conveyed the deep divide of racism and discrimination more than the signs, "We serve only Whites. No Blacks allowed" posted in the doors and windows of restaurants in the southern US before the civil rights movement of the 1960's. The global trade of food has set up structures that for too long, have exploited migrant workers and subsistence farmers. Thankfully this has given rise to the fair trade movement that ensures better prices, decent working conditions and a fair deal for farmers and workers in developing countries.

Over the past 50 years, our increasingly hectic paced society has given rise to the fast food phenomena, which has led an increased rate of obesity on our culture

In Canada and the US, we spend over \$50 billion each year on dieting products and programs. At any given moment, 25% of males and 45% females are dieting in our society. Christians in Canada and the US spend more on dieting than on world missions.

We spend more on curing our overeating than we do on feeding the spiritual and physical hunger of the world. There is a dark side to food. I had a woman tell me recently that the kitchen table in their home was a war field for a few years as her daughter battled eating disorders. Anything that is good can if a dark side it we let it get out of control. I am sure we have all experienced it.

Given all that I have shared, I sure it will not surprise you to find out that food, and hospitality are deeply biblical themes. This past winter, one of our own church members, Calvin Thiessen who is a bit of an expert in this area facilitated a Going Deeper elective called, "Redefining Hospitality." He was kind enough to share his notes with me.

He observed that Hospitality was part of God's original design for his people. It was to be part of the way that we could be a witness of God's goodness to the world and part of the way that we would be a blessing to others.

If you think about it, right from the beginning, God extended hospitality to his creation by providing Adam and Eve with a welcoming place, the Garden of Eden, with plenty of good food and provision.

Look at what it says in,

Genesis 2:8-9

"Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground— trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food."

And as we now know, having just finished a 31week message series *The Story* on the entire biblical narrative, there are many times throughout the bible where God continues to extend hospitality to his people. After Eden, God gave his people another place, the Promised Land. It is described in the book of Exodus as a land flowing with milk and honey. It was a place with food, good food. God, the host extends a future invitation for humanity to sit at a bountiful banquet table,

Isaiah 25:6

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

As we move into the New Testament, we see that the giving of his son, Jesus, to the world was an act of love and hospitality. Jesus was God's provision for His people.

John 6:35, Jesus declared,

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

In Jesus, we have a place to reside and we have provision for spiritual thirst and hunger. Jesus is the ultimate gift of hospitality to a needy world. We have the choice whether to accept the hospitality or not, don't we?

It is interesting that in referring to Jesus, the New Testament states that there are three ways that the Son of Man, an expression used to describe Jesus, came into the world. Anyone know what they are?

Mark 10:45, says

"...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Luke 19:10, says

"...the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."

Luke 7:34 says

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking,..."

These first two statements are about purpose, why did he come. Jesus came to serve and seek and save the lost. But the third statement is about methodology. How did he come? He came eating and drinking.

The Son of Man, Jesus, the Messiah and Saviour of the world, has come. But how does he come? Does he come down from some clouds in heaven? Does he come in a blaze of glory? Does he come strutting on a red carpet with the lights flashing of the paparazzi or to the fanfare of a sports star entering the arena? No. He comes eating and drinking. I like this guy.

That is not the way the people of his day were expecting him to come and I would suggest that it is not the way that we tend to see Jesus today either. Jesus was so serious about eating and drinking with others that his enemies actually accused him of doing it too much. Eating too much and drinking too much.

Luke 7:34

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'

That's scandalous, isn't it? Just before this, back in Luke 5:33, the Pharisees said to Jesus,

Luke 5:33

"John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking."

Jesus, and his followers spent a lot of their time eating and drinking. It was his mission strategy. It was how Jesus did evangelism and discipleship. Around a table, with some fish, a little bread, a glass of wine listening to people's stories, hearing their heart break, engaging them in life, answering their questions. Challenging them in their beliefs.

I don't know if you have ever noticed this but the Gospel of Luke is full of stories of Jesus eating with people.

Luke 5, Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi.

Luke 7, Jesus is anointed at the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal.

Luke 9, Jesus feeds the 5 000.

Luke 10, Jesus eats in the home of Martha and Mary.

Luke 11, Jesus condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law at a meal.

Luke 14, Jesus is at a meal when he urges people to invite the poor to around their dinner table rather than their friends.

Luke 19, Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus.

Luke 22, Jesus has a last supper with his disciples

Luke 24, the risen Christ has a meal with two disciples in Emmaus and then later eats fish with his followers in Jerusalem.

Christian author Robert Karris states that, "*In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is either going to a meal, at a*

meal, or coming from a meal." (Robert Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*. page 14.)

Remarkable.

In the life and ministry of Jesus, meals were what enacted grace, community and mission. Meals represented something bigger, a new kingdom, a new way of doing things where sharing lives is significant. The meals of Jesus are a window into the greater message that he came to proclaim. A message of love, hope, compassion and grace.

Our challenge throughout this series will be:

What do the various meals that Jesus shared with others, teach us?

The application will be:

With whom and how are we sharing the table with others?

Your table, yes but also, are you accepting invitations from others to sit at their table. That is sometimes a little more uncomfortable isn't it? But the ministry of hospitality is about learning to be both a host and a guest? To both give and receive. To do life with others but sometimes, we are the "others"! It can get a little complicated and a little messy because it involves people invading our personal space or going to places where we don't always feel comfortable. But remember, Jesus ate with and accepted the hospitality of sinners, tax collectors and Pharisees and it came at a bit of a cost. He was gossiped about and his name was slandered. But the value of the fellowship around the table trumped all of that.

Jesus even hosted meals that were not easy. He served and ate his final meal with the one who would later betray him to his death. And you thought your family Christmas meal was awkward?!

I may be a little naïve, but this is what I think. With all that is going on in the world, the political and economic instability. The protests and the unrest. The increasing violence. The break-up of the family unit. The list goes on and on, just read the papers, watch the news or follow twitter.

Often times, our response is to throw up our hands and say this is hopeless and then we buy extra locks

for our doors and isolate ourselves more and more, even in the church. We go on the defensive.

But I think it is time for us, especially as Christians to go on the offensive. There is one thing that we could do that would dramatically change the world we live in and help us return to our connection with Jesus, are you ready for it? Here it is: Write this down.

We need to bring back the table.

We need to make the table the most sacred object of furniture in our homes. What would you say is the most sacred object in your homes now? We need to make the table the most sacred object of furniture in our homes, in our communities, even in our churches. If we were to do that I believe our world would become a different place. Do you know that meals eaten at restaurants are almost always less healthy than foods cooked at home? Homemade foods generally have less fat, salt and caloric content and yet we are eating out more and more and eating in less and less. In our culture today, we eat one in every five meals in our car. One in four of us eat at least one fast food meal every day. Canadian and U.S. households spend roughly the same amount per week on fast food as on groceries. Here's the kicker. Fifty years ago, do you know how long the average dinnertime was? Anyone? 90 minutes. Families together around a table for 1 ½ hours. Sitting together, sharing stories, reading the bible, praying, it all happened at the meal. Do you know the average time families spend around the table today? Anyone? 12 minutes.

That's when we do actually eat dinner together, which is less frequent. Families reported eating a single meal together less than five days a week, and even then dinners together are often interrupted by cell phones, and television. No wonder the average parent spends about 38 ½ minutes per week in meaningful conversation with their children. We have lost the table.

In his article, **The Importance of Eating Together**, Sociologist Cody Delistraty found these correlations:

-The #1 factor for parents raising children who are drug free, healthy, kind- Frequent family dinners

-The #1 predictor of future academic success in elementary aged children- frequent family dinners

-one of the best safeguards against childhood obesity- frequent family dinners

-one of the best prescription to prevent eating disorders among adolescent girls- frequent family dinners, (that exude a positive influence)

-The variable most associated with lower incidences of depression and suicidal thoughts among 11-18 years old- frequent family dinners.

And all that can happen around the table. But let me just be clear on this, you can eat out at a restaurant and still have a family table and you can eat at home and have no table at all. For some, having Kraft Dinner or a Big Mac can be a sacred feast if shared together in the spirit of Jesus. For others, the best home cooked meal can be such a burden when offered around a table of grumbling and complaining family members.

That is why it is so interesting that television has more recently aired shows such as Duck Dynasty and Blue Bloods that prominently feature family dinners, including prayers over meals and sharing stories and laughter together. Our culture is hungry for more table time and for more table talk.

Maybe this is something that you can talk about as a family this week? How are you making use of the table in your home and is the spirit of Jesus present there?

I have been so fortunate to have a wife that as always made the table an important part of our family life. Not only is she a wonderful cook, but she advocates for family meals and it is harder and harder now that are children are mostly grown and living away from us, but just last weekend, we had everyone together at the cottage. The only day this summer everyone will be together and we cherished our time.

The weather wasn't great so we spent a lot of the time around the table, eating good food, laughing and teasing, sharing stories and when the meal was cleaned away, the board games came out and we played together around that same table.

We look forward to the table expanding with our first grandson coming in November, but our table has eight leafs so the more the merrier.

But beyond our families, another challenge may be; how are we making use of the table in our homes for reaching out to others, even strangers? To open our homes or be willing to go to homes of others. To give and receive hospitality would go a long way towards busting down the walls of hostility that we seem to be building in our neighbours, cities and world, even our churches these days, would you agree?

In scripture, Jesus redefined what it means to be family. When he fed the 5 000 people on the hillside, all of them became his family and the hillside became his table. When he cooked fish along the seashore after his resurrection, his disciples became his family. Those who feast at Jesus' table become family together in a new kind of relationship- one that breaks through bloodlines, race, prejudice and divisions.

For Jesus the home is not what defines the table, the table is what defines the home. It doesn't matter if it is a mom, dad and two children or a single parent home, a blended family, seniors in a nursing home or a house full of university students. What happens at the table defines the home.

Four years ago this summer, Carolyn and I moved from what we had known as "home" for most of our lives, KW and settled in a quiet, lovely crescent just down the road from here. One of the decisions we made from the start was that we wanted to get to know our neighbours. On our street, we have nine homes. For the first few months we exchanged pleasantries with our neighbours and then, thanks again to Carolyn's persistence, we decided that we needed to have them over for dinner.

In our observations of the street dynamics, we had noticed that some neighbours seemed to have more of a connection with some than others, so we decided to have two separate dinners inviting half of the neighbours for dinner one night and the other half a couple of weeks later.

As always, Carolyn cooked two wonderful meals and each night, we had amazing conversations around the table. In fact, I forgot to mention this, Carolyn and I are the youngest on the street, so we

thought we could invite them for 6:00 pm, they would probably leave by 8:00 or 8:30 pm. It would be a good night. They are a little older, they need their rest. But each night, they were well past 10 pm sitting and talking at our table. That was past Carolyn and my bed time! But, it has started something.

We have gotten to know our neighbours. For the past three summers, we have had street BBQ's together. We have been invited to several of their homes for dinner or dessert. We have hosted an open house for our street at Christmas in our home the past few years and all of them came. We had a surprise 80th birthday party for a neighbour in our backyard.

We look after each other's homes when people are away on holidays, take in the mail, newspapers, water the plants. When Carolyn fell off our front porch and broke her ankle last year, she was in the midst of doing some gardening. While I had her at the hospital, the neighbours came over and dug and planted our gardens. They finished the work.

But here is the more amazing thing, when you live closely with others and choose to do life with them, when you invite them to your table, your faith is on display. Hopefully they see Jesus in you and around your table. What started around the table has led to Carolyn and I developing some deeper connections with each of our neighbours.

Two have lost spouses in the past few years and we have been able to extend practical care and compassion in their grief. Two have gone through serious health concerns and we have been invited into their home to pray for them.

One of the families has a child being married and I was asked to officiate at the backyard wedding. One is experiencing some early signs of dementia and we have joined with some of the other neighbours to arranged rides to doctor's appointments, food, and regular visits to lift her spirits.

Do you know that when we first met our neighbours and they found out I was a pastor, it led to some good natured joking and teasing because as far as we knew, only a couple of them attended church. But, God has used the connection to give Carolyn and I many opportunities to pray and share our faith

with them and God has used their lives to be a blessing to us as well.

That is the power of the table. It is a place where even strangers can become family. Cultivating hospitality is about building community. When we eat together, we talk together and when we talk together we find out what is important to people and it opens up conversations about faith. Do you understand that? Have you experienced it?

Our churches, our neighbourhood, our city, our world needs us, as followers of Jesus to bring back the table.

That is what this summer series is all about. Our prayer is that your hearts would be stirred and be challenged to open your tables to those God places in your life, family and others. But that you would also be willing to go to where you are invited and receive hospitality that is extended to you.

You never know where and how Jesus will show up at the table and in the table talk.

Amen? Amen.

Let's pray

Points to Ponder

Table Talk

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Try doing the exercise Paul mentioned in his sermon. Draw a floor plan of the home you were raised in. Which room in that home was most meaningful to you? Share with your group.
2. Describe some of the ways that food has connected your family. Have meals been used to celebrate special events? What are some of the memories you have had around the table?
3. Does the table play a significant role in the life of your family? Do you take time to regularly sit as a family for meals? What gets in the way of that time? How can you prioritize that time as a family?
4. Describe some of the ways that you have extended hospitality to others and accepted hospitality from others. Which are you more comfortable with, being the host or being the guest? Why?
5. What does it mean to you that, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking"? Is this a picture of Jesus that resonates with you or not? Why?
6. Discuss the idea that as followers of Jesus, we need to "bring back the table". How do you think elevating the importance of hospitality and sharing meals would impact your neighbours' lives and your life?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for opportunities and a boldness to invite others around your table this summer. Pray also for a willingness to receive hospitality from others. If family meals are not a priority in your home, invite God to help guide you to increase the value of the table with your family.