

TABLES & FABLES

Presented by The Rev. Marq Toombs

My interest in tables stems from my childhood experience. The table was the place where many of the most significant things happened in my life. I remember Mom and Dad playing cards with friends at the table, clouds of smoke filled the room, sweaty glasses of sweet-tea in front of everyone. I remember Mom sitting up late reading the Bible, writing out her prayers, waiting for her sons to get home.

In my own family, one of the first things we did as newly-weds was to commission a big table to be made for us by an Amish craftsman near Clarita, Oklahoma. To this day, 28 years later, that same table sits in our dining room. We don't even know how many people have sat at the table, shared a meal, played a game, listened to counsel, done homework, told stories; we only know that the table has been central to our life.

I invited a friend to this symposium and mentioned my topic to him. He flashed a big smile and chuckled a little. I asked what was so funny. He said, "Nothing. It just reminded me of an episode of Seinfeld. Kramer publishes a coffee table book about coffee tables. He makes a guest appearance on Regis & Kathy Lee to promote his book. And he shows off a special feature for those who do not have coffee tables – the book comes with legs that can be popped out so that the coffee table book becomes a small coffee table.

Where do tables come from? What can fiction teach us about the significance of tables? Why do tables and fables matter for faith and life?

Tables play a more significant role in your life than you might think or know. More than likely, all of us grew up with tables. Tables next to our bed, in front of our sofas, beside our sofas, in the kitchen, in the dining room, on the patio, at the park, in the restaurant, the coffee shop, the pub, at school, at work, at church.

From what I gather, no one knows the exact origin of the table. It's safe to say that from time immemorial image-bearers have used wood and stone to keep things elevated from the ground.

[For the following section I rely on various sources. See the links below for more details.]

“Primitive versions of tables, chairs, and even couches date as far back as Neolithic and ancient Egyptian times.” But they are different from our notions of tables and chairs.



[The ancient Egyptians and Chinese used tables as pedestals and desks, but not necessarily for meals. The Chinese are credited with making the first-floor mats to be used while eating. The Greeks preferred to eat while lounging on a couch, not sitting at a table.

The table as we know started to come into its own in the 7th century BC. It started evolving in the time of the Greeks. There was a gradual development of workbenches, pedestals, and meal-prep stations. They even invented a folding table that could be stowed away under beds or against walls after use.

In the Ancient Near East and Jewish world, tables were made low to the ground. People sat, knelt, or reclined to eat at the table.

But, in the 2 or 3 centuries before Christ, “Tables were not seen as a primary item for furniture in the home or palaces. However, tables were often important for providing offerings in sacrifices, where altars essentially resembled a type of table that provided or served a sacrifice to the gods.” (Hold onto this thought. We will come back to it in a moment.)

Throughout history, as tables became more widely accepted as furniture, and used in homes, they became status symbols that marked a distinction between the haves and the have nots. The more elaborate and ornate, the wealthier and more powerful one was. The more simple and basic, the poorer and weaker one was.

In the early Medieval period, tables once again lost some of their prominence. But in the Renaissance, they made a resurgence. While the basic design of tables has not evolved much, the decorations of tables have evolved quite a bit.

Necessity is the mother of invention. So, depending on needs and uses, tables have taken on all sorts of shapes and sizes. Square, round, oval, rectangular; short, tall, wide, narrow. Just like the people who use them.

*Tables, tables, everywhere,
lots of room to meet.
Tables, tables, everywhere,
lots to drink and eat.*

If you wish to explore this history some more, see the links in the end notes below.

Tables play a significant role in life, and also in faith. One of the most beautiful scenes imagined in Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, involves Jesus, his mother Mary, and a table. It opens with Jesus standing, bound, bruised, and bloodied, surrounded by the soldiers who have beaten him. He sees a man working with a hammer. That triggers a memory: A flashback to a day when he was making a new table. His mother is kneeling down to set the table, and she calls him to come and eat. No answer. So she goes outside to see what Jesus is working on. She says, "That's certainly a tall table. Who is it for?" Jesus answers playfully, "A rich man!" Mary looks at him skeptically, smiles, and asks if the rich man likes to eat standing up. Jesus explains that a tall table needs tall chairs. He demonstrates how it might look. Mary gives it a try but loses her balance. Jesus reaches for her and chuckles. She says, "This will never catch on." I find it so interesting and moving that the filmmakers imagined a table at the center of Jesus and Mary's relationship. That's so fitting isn't it?

In his wonderful book, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table*, Tim Chester poses a thought question for our consideration. How would you complete the sentence: "The Son of Man came . . ."? There are three ways the Gospels complete the sentence, "The Son of Man came"

One, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many ” (Mark 10:45); Two, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10); Three, “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking . . . ” (Luke 7: 34). All three of these statements come together when we consider the meaning and purpose of tables in (say) the Gospel of Luke.

One commentator (Robert Karris) says: “In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is either going to a meal, reclining at a meal, or coming from a meal.” To go to a meal meant going to a table. Tables were a central part of his ministry.

Jesus ate and drank with all kinds of people — outsiders and insiders, sinners and saints. He ate and drank so often that some critics even called him a glutton and a drunkard. But his eating and drinking had a missional and liturgical purpose.

The missional purpose is seen in stories where Jesus

- eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi (Luke 5)
- is anointed at the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal (Luke 7)
- feeds the five thousand (Luke 9)
- eats in the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10)
- debates and condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law at a meal (Luke 11)
- urges people to invite the poor to their meals rather than their friends (Luke 14)
- invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus (Luke 19)

The liturgical purpose is seen in stories where Jesus

- establishes and institutes the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22)
- reveals himself at a table with the two disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24)

Again, notice the missional and liturgical rhyme and reason for all these tables.

The little tables are missional. The big Table is liturgical. The ordinary tables are missional. The extraordinary table is liturgical. A careful reading of Luke’s Gospel shows that Jesus treated all meals as if they were “sacramental” — they were little signs of grace that pointed to the big sign of the grace in the Eucharist. Why?

Because ordinary tables are extensions of the extraordinary table of the Lord.

They help bridge the gap between the lost world and the Lord’s table. They are signposts that help people find their way to the Savior. They are stepping stones up to the Eucharist.

In her article on the Liturgy of the Dinner Table, Marlo Slayback writes:

“The kitchen and dining table are civilizational labs, with their own economies and sociologies. The dining table ought to be a place with a culture, rituals, and formality, but for many American homes it is interchangeable with the bed or couch. This kind of eating—usually solitary, usually accompanied by the distracting blue glow of a screen, usually without prayer—is passive and often mindless, akin to the feeding habits of wildlife. It’s also distinctively American, a national norm that most other cultures find uncouth.” Tables are places where some of the most important things happen. Tables are where you eat and drink and share life. Tables are where you read mail, sign contracts, and plead with loved ones. Tables are where you drink coffee and play games. Tables are places where you sit and wait and think. Tables are where you feast.

The Table of all tables is the Lord’s Table. It gives all other tables their shape and significance.

Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and he gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

What makes this meal extraordinary is not the bread and wine but the Spirit and words of the Lord Jesus Christ, which consecrate the ordinary bread and wine and sets them apart from common use for holy use.

This is the Lord’s Supper: Jesus is the Gracious Host who invites us to his Table to participate in his body and blood by partaking of holy bread and holy wine at his holy altar-table.

Remember what we saw earlier: there was a time before Christ when “tables were important for providing offerings in sacrifices, where altars essentially resembled a type of table that provided or served a sacrifice to the gods.” That was true for Israel and holds true for the Church.

The altar-table is a place of deeper magic in the story of God’s people.

It was the place where God and his people met and communed in the Old Testament. Sacrifices were offered and received: Some were turned to smoke and consumed by the Lord alone; others were grilled or roasted and consumed by the priests and their families. Also, shewbread and candlesticks were displayed on a table in the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 23).

The altar was a table, the table was an altar.

The altar-table is the place where God and his people commune in the New Testament. Sacrifices are given and taken, offered and received.

As the apostle Paul put it in Hebrews 13: We should not let ourselves be carried away with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; we have an altar, from which non-Christians have no right to eat, but we do have the right, because Christ spreads a table for us in the presence of our enemies.

Like Jonathan's crippled son Mephibosheth, we might come limping or crawling or even carried, but we must come and take our places at the Lord's Table among the mighty men, "with angels and archangels, and all the hosts of heaven".

There is a deep magic at work in the altar-table of the Lord. This deeper magic is beautifully depicted by CS Lewis in his children's book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: the altar upon which Aslan the Lion-King was sacrificed was called the Stone-Table.

Other beautiful and powerful stories take place around tables:

In Cormac McCarthy's novel, *"The Road"*, a father and his boy are struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. As they make a long trek towards the coast through the wet ash and darkness, they are confronted with many dangers and troubles, threats and death. They are starving and death is a few days away. In their darkest hour they stumble across a hidden door. Risking life and limb, they descend into a secret bunker stocked with all sorts of food and drink. The father uses a footlocker as a makeshift table. He serves up a feast of ham, beans, coffee, and buttered biscuits. The boy asks if they should give thanks for those who left all this food and stuff – and they do. The boy ends his eucharistic prayer with these words: "we hope you're safe in heaven with God." And he looked up.

In “The Moviegoer”, Walker Percy tells the story of Binx Bolling, aka Jack. He goes to visit his family down in the bayou at his mother’s fish camp. The story moves from one meal to another, from one table to another. Jack feels out of place intellectually, professionally, and spiritually. He mentions that his mother and siblings still pray that he will rediscover the faith he has lost. But his secret is that he never lost his faith because, like his father, he never had it. Still, towards the end of his visit, he and his half-brother Lonnie go for a ride and talk heart-to-heart. Lonnie is weak, sick, and dying. Unlike Jack, he is devout. He needs help receiving the Eucharist. He is envious of a friend who died because he gets to see the face of Christ. He considers the Eucharist a sacrament of the living and expresses his concern – rather his love – for Jack. At the end of the visit, Jack kisses Lonnie goodbye. Lonnie says, “Wait...Do you think the Eucharist”... and trails off, not sure what else to say ... then he finally says, “I am still offering my Eucharist for you.” Jack says, “I know,” and tells his little brother that he loves him “quite a bit.”

Even non-believing authors recognize the power of the beauty of the Eucharistic Table.

During Holy Week this year, the poet-priest Malcolm Guite wrote about an experience he had at St Deiniol’s Cathedral in Bangor. (The parish was founded in the Year of our Lord 525 AD.) He wrote: “At the chrism service, and the renewal of vows for the clergy and lay ministers of the diocese, dedicating and consecrating a new nave altar-table: a beautiful and simple piece of furniture, a wooden trestle table whose design evoked both a carpenter’s workbench and the tables that one sees in some depictions of the Last Supper.

But here, again, the ancient and the new were interlayered; for they brought to the table, and placed within it, a little cache of the soil of Bardsey Island, the island of 20,000 saints, one of whom was St Deiniol, so that the dust of the saints carried with it the reminder of the communion of the saints invoked in the eucharist.

Best of all, though, was the line of poetry composed by the translator of my sonnets and inscribed in Welsh at the front of the altar-table. Its English translation reads: “From the blue slate abundance flows to fill afresh our llannau’s [parish’s] wells.” It was a beautiful evocation both of the miraculous stream flowing from the rock in Exodus, of Christ as the “stricken rock with streaming side”, and also of the slates

of the Ogwen Valley and the River Adda flowing past Bangor and the “llannau [parish church]”, the glades of the Celtic saints, and their abundant holy wells.

Receiving communion from that table, I felt that I had indeed come to a wellhead, a source, and, through it, once again, to the source of all things.”

A brief reading from Two Towers (Tolkien). A moment when Treebeard carries two terrified, dislocated hobbits to his home, a cave under the waterfall.

He sets them on his stone table, illumines the house with special lights, and serves them sweetwater. Their feet dangle over the edge of the large stone table.

The whole scene is Eucharistic. Treebeard washes his feet, serves his friends, drinks deeply, reclines at the table, and invites the two friends to tell their story and not to hurry.

Treebeard's words are like the comfortable words spoken before you are invited to partake of the Eucharist and taste the story.

What if we were to imitate what Treebeard did for the hobbits, what Christ does for us, with our friends and family at our tables.

“Come, eat and drink with me at my table. Let me serve you. Let me give you the gift of my time. Tell me your story. Don't get in a hurry.”

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Notes

After the presentation, Jennifer Engle pointed out that Jesus turned over the tables of the money-changers. Her point: the Lord will not tolerate those who misuse tables.

Also, someone mentioned that the first mention of tables in the Bible is found in Exodus 25. That's the first liturgical table. A foreshadow of the Eucharist is found in Genesis 43 says that “Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. And they drank and were merry with him.”

Father Michael added a comment to the effect that: the altar of the home is the table; the center of the Domestic Monastery; the sanctuary / holy of holies of the family life.