

“FOOD FOR THOUGHT: TABLE TALK”

Luke 22:14-38

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

“A scientist, a priest, an historian, and a poet walk into a bar....’ The line sounds like a lead in to a tired joke” (p.117) notes Martin Marty in his book, *Building Cultures of Trust*. Marty does have a sense of humor, but there’s no punch line to this opening sentence in one of his chapters. These professionals bring “distinctive voices” to subject matters that can impede the building of trust when they refuse to acknowledge the possibility of truth outside their areas of expertise. The fundamentalist who regards evolution as apostasy, the microbiologist who regards belief in God as the firing of certain neurons in the brain.

In a world that has gotten very good at fostering mistrust, Marty is keen to show us how we might begin to build trust not just between individuals but within our institutions as well. How do we build bridges between one isolated community of shared assumptions and another who sees the world through a different lens? The short answer is with “conversation.” He writes that it is “not the be-all and end-all of trust-building; but without it there can only be soliloquy, solipsism, isolation, distortion, or misrepresentation” (p.127). According to David Tracy, conversation “is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dia-logue” (p.134). Tracy goes on to quote Bernard Lonergan’s recommendation to those who would be conversation partners: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.”

So... some fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, a financial advisor, a rabbi, and a few other professionals walk into an “upper room.” It’s a story we know well, but typically, we focus primarily on the ritual which serves as the basis for our sacrament of communion. There are two conversations going on here: the conversation Jesus is having with the “apostles” within the story itself, and the conversation we are having with the text.

Our conversation begins with being attentive to the text. Here are some important things to note. It is Passover, the defining event in Judaism’s self-understanding. It celebrates their deliverance from Egypt, from slavery to freedom, from feeling abandoned by God to a restoration of their relationship to God. Jesus’ words turn it from a remembrance of past deliverance to an anticipation of future deliverance, from remembrance of an event to remembrance of a person. “The next time I share this meal with you,” Jesus seems to be saying, “God’s reign will be in full swing.” And so when we celebrate the sacrament, we too, remember Jesus, and acknowledge God’s ongoing presence with the faith community.

Within this faith community, the sacrament builds trust because we also see the ritual as welcoming all, including children and those of other faiths under the umbrella of Christianity. We understand it as a grace that addresses our needs whether they be hard times, qualms of conscience, or strength for the living out of faith. It brings us together.

Another thing to notice here is that the conversation takes place around a meal. Luke emphasizes certain parts of the meal that the community will pull out to form its own ritual. Communion is not a Passover meal, but its meaning is rooted in Passover. That being said, food or a meal, sets the stage for a difficult conversation. In many ancient and modern cultures, a meal is a declaration of friendship. As such it carries a certain presumption of trust. More than any other gospel, Luke has Jesus sitting down to eat with all kinds of people, from Pharisees to tax collectors; and when his compassion urges him to feed the multitudes, he builds a sense of trust that must spread even beyond his followers.

At the risk of getting a little side-tracked, let me point out that there are no women acknowledged at this meal. There may have been women serving the meal. There may have been other tables at which women disciples were included; but Jesus takes his place with the other boys, whom he will later give authority to in the kingdom. Now we could do what some others have done with this observation and suggest that women don't belong in ministry... but that would be using the text to justify a particular worldview instead of having a conversation with the text. Those who would use a social convention of the first century to justify a prescription for the twenty-first century are not being attentive, intelligent, responsible or loving. They are looking to scripture for an argument, not a conversation. A conversation asks questions like: "Where do we see women? What roles do they play? What relationship do they have to Jesus? Are there examples of women in leadership elsewhere in the New Testament? What roles have women played in the two millennia since Jesus? What do we know today about the impact of gender roles on men and women?"

When people say, "the Bible says" in order to prove a point, I just want to remind them that the Bible "says" a lot of things. Bringing our questions to the Bible is not the same as questioning the Bible. It's how we begin a conversation that is attentive, intelligent, responsible and loving. It's how we maintain respect for both the biblical world and our own. When people of faith have conversations with scripture instead of regarding it as an immutable rule book they discover a God who called people to ministry without regard to gender, who welcomed people irrespective of sexual orientation.

You don't get there unless you're willing to have a conversation that respects the expertise of the various conversation partners: the historians who can tell us about the context of the biblical story, the translators who understand the nuances of Greek and Hebrew words, the poets and prophets of our own time attending to God's continuing presence, as well as the experiences that you bring to the table.

Keeping the conversation that we have with the text in mind, let's briefly look at the actual conversation within the story. I've already talked about Jesus' introductory remarks that set the stage for the sacrament that will become central for the early life of the church. It's important that we understand that the conversation that follows takes place in the context of the meal they are sharing, a context that emphasizes deliverance or salvation, that focuses on grace and on Jesus' love for his disciples.

Jesus goes on to talk about betrayal and the irreparable harm that will come to the betrayer. And that's when they begin to talk among themselves, to question each other, to suspect each other. This leads directly to a dispute, an argument, about who is the greatest.

It'll become evident that Jesus is looking past the difficult events of the next few days, events that could break the faith community apart. Without the conversation, it certainly would. Jesus addresses three concerns for the future faith community: the impact of the betrayal, Peter's denial, and the more dangerous times in which they will find themselves. To bounce back from the first two, they will need a different model of leadership. The community will not need leaders who flaunt their authority. Not a strong leader, but a leader who serves. The health of the faith community will not depend on leaders who draw attention to themselves, but leaders who attend to and tend the needs of the church. In John's Gospel, he offers the example of washing their feet.

Having said that, he affirms their support for him, and reminds them how important they will become to the early church. And then he turns to Peter, whom he says will face a severe test. When Peter assures him that he will pass with flying colors, Jesus tells him flat out about the denial. And then he says, "when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Weakness is not betrayal. Betrayal destroys trust. Weakness, in the form of fear, can be overcome. In turning back, Peter will set the example that the faith community needs to come back together, and to flourish in the dangerous times ahead.

I hope you will find some food for thought in the conversation Jesus has around the table with his disciples and in what we bring to the table as we think about this story. But here's what moves me most about this story. As the community gathered around Jesus faces the biggest threat to its future, Jesus refuses to avoid the difficult conversation.

At the table of grace, he tells them about the betrayal. He tells them about Peter's denial. He tells them about the danger. At the table of gratitude, he also offers thanks for standing by him. At the table of deliverance, he reminds Peter that denial is not the same as betrayal, and he urges him to get back on his feet and encourage his friends. He tells them that God's reign will come and that they will play a key role in forming the new faith community. At the table of friendship he affirms his trust in them, and shows them a model of leadership that builds a culture of trust.

The importance of this story cannot be overstated. It will not be the last time the church faces a crisis. As church becomes less important to many people in our culture, individual congregations face the prospect of closing, have to mediate personal conflicts that disrupt the community, or have to negotiate controversial issues of the day.

Let's gather at the table and talk about it. Let's continue to build the culture of trust where difficult conversations bear fruit instead of division. When this church experienced a time when worship preferences varied, we talked about it and started a second service. When the numbers wouldn't support two services, we talked about it again and figured out how

to put it back together in ways that respected all. When many of you expressed concern about our witness to the LGBTQ community, we talked about and adopted a welcome statement. When COVID came, we figured out ways to keep talking to each other, to not just hold the faith community together, but to make it stronger.

Martin Marty acknowledged that most institutions in our world operate with a heavy dose of suspicion and he acknowledged that suspicion did have a role to play; but ultimately, the health of society depends on building cultures of trust. Instead of expressing optimism or pessimism, he chose to cite examples where it was happening: scientists and religious professionals engaged in conversation, various groups forming coalitions to discuss and promote more sustainable environmental behavior, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

I struggled through Marty's book, but the main point was always clear. The best tool for building cultures of trust, for generating healthy societies, is conversation with partners based on a mutual commitment to attention or listening, intelligence and responsibility, or truth telling, and love. That's what we get around this table: a God who listens, who isn't afraid to tell us hard truths, and whose love is inexhaustible. Amen.

Resources:

Marty, Martin E. *Building Cultures of Trust* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids MI. 2010.