

## **"Finding a Place at the Table"**

Proverbs 4:10-21; Mark 10:13-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 22, 2015 – Reign of Christ – Rev. Ronald Botts

When you're twenty-one you feel that you've finally arrived at the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Sometimes, however, you get a stiff jolt of reality.

It was tradition in my girlfriend's family for all the relatives, near and far, to gather for Thanksgiving each year. Since I was practically part of the family by then, I was invited for the holiday as well.

We were the last of almost thirty people to arrive and, of course, everybody knew everybody except for me. The buffet table was loaded with all kinds of good food, so that there was no doubt about whether there would be enough to go around.

As a guest of sorts I was encouraged to go first, which I found to be a nice honor. I loaded my plate and started for the big empty table to find a place to sit down. This, I discovered, was a mistake. An honest one but a big one.

The dining room table had all the extra leaves it could hold and then was beautifully set with a lace cloth and good crystal and silverware. Twelve chairs were placed around it, one of which I assumed was meant for me. Wrong!

Just before I could sit down Aunt Mildred let me know, ever so sweetly, that Martha and I would be seated elsewhere. I looked around but all I could see were several card tables set up in the living room. These were covered with plastic tablecloths, had paper napkins, and the glassware was undeniably from the kitchen cupboard. They referred to these as the "children's" tables. Indeed, there were some little ones already in place, bibs and all. My ego dropped like a rock.

It wasn't until another couple joined us and then an unmarried cousin sat down, that I began to feel better. Later I learned that you didn't get a place at the "adult" table until you were at least in your 40's. In this family you earned your way to the lace tablecloth by virtue of your years, and when you got there, you might be assured that you had finally grown up. By then, unfortunately, you were probably wanting to forget your age.

We're always conscious of how others regard us. Assuming a seat at the big table is an affirmation that we have attained our place within the world. The better positioned our seat, the greater value it signifies about our personal stock. The more you're on your way up, the harder it becomes to look back.

Contrast this to what Martin Luther once said: "When I preach, I stoop down. I do not look up to the Doctors and Masters of Arts, of whom there are about forty in my audience, but I look upon the crowd of young people, children, the servants of whom there are several hundreds. To them I preach. To them I adapt myself. If the doctors don't care to hear that style of preaching, the door is open for them to leave."

Jesus seems to be saying much the same thing in our Gospel reading for this morning. He, too, talks about children. "Let the children come to me," he corrects his disciples, "and do not stop them, for really the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Those words must have been surprising because the young then were loved, but not highly regarded. They were seen more for their potential benefit to the family as they grew and assumed more of the work.

Well, we'd have to admit that some children have more endearing qualities than others, and even the sweetest ones can have their moments. In one of W. C. Field's movies someone asks him the question, "How do you like children?" to which he answered with his typical dry humor, "Well cooked."

Jesus, by contrast, takes a far more positive view. He might have responded to the same question about children by replying, "Well copied!" In the Gospels we observe that his attitude toward children is always open and inviting. He even holds them up as examples from which the rest of us can learn. In his teaching Jesus advocated that children are as much leaders as followers, as much our benefactors as the recipients of our care. Of course none of this made any sense to those who were so learned and close-minded that they could only consider it to be sheer foolishness.

So what was it Jesus saw in children that qualified them for entrance and participation in God's Kingdom? I imagine it was things like innocence, spontaneity, energy, trust, affection. Children are naturally enthusiastic and open. Their imaginations can transport them almost anywhere. Not only do they believe they can do the impossible, but sometimes they do it!

Surely, though, Jesus can't be telling us to become childish? We work so hard at trying to be adults; we can't just toss this all away. We can't return to our infancy.

Could it be, instead that Christ was saying we need to recover the child-like qualities within our personality? That's an aspect of ourselves we tend to put aside as we grow up. It's something we need to rediscover and value as adults so that we can more fully experience God.

In a certain city there was a single mom and her eight-year-old son. They lived in a drab apartment with rather meager furnishings. Life was difficult and money was scarce. The mother had to work at two jobs just to make ends meet. Still, there was a strong love between this parent and child despite the conditions under which they had to live.

At the end of a hard day, when all the dishes were done and the homework completed, this mother and son looked forward to sitting on the couch and talking together. Often she would recall when she was young and lived on a farm. She told her boy about riding a favorite pony, sliding down a haystack, and wading in the brook which ran through the back of the meadow.

Whenever she thought of those days it brought her joy. Her son noticed that the wrinkles on her tired face seemed to soften and she looked years younger as she spoke. The stories, and the storyteller, seemed to fuse into one as she returned to thoughts of her own childhood.

One evening, when she seemed especially alive by re-experiencing the eight-year-old of her own past, he looked up at her and said with all sincerity, "Mommy, I wish I had met you earlier."

The more serious we become in life, the more unbending and unyielding, the more demanding of ourselves and others, the more we have a tendency to close off the full soul within us. The more we deal with the concrete rather than the abstract, the provable from the speculative, the facts from the fancy, the more we are likely to lose the creative spirit within us.

To experience God, Jesus said, you have to know God and not simply learn about God. Entering the Kingdom, God's world within the world, requires a certain going backward as well as going forward. It means stripping off the limitations we put on ourselves to discover the complete breadth of what God holds out to us. It means seeing life again through eyes of wonder and asking, "Why not?"

Pablo Picasso observed perceptively, "It takes one a long time to become young." That seems to me an insightful commentary on life. That gift originally given us must be re-found and used if we are to get the greatest benefit from anything as important as faith. The child in us and the adult in us both need to find their places.

The selection from Proverbs today lifts up the importance of an older generation nurturing the next. Practical lessons need to be learned in life. We are called upon to share what our parents and their generation taught us as part of our responsibility back to those just growing up. The proverbs are full of such wisdom, but this morning we're challenged to understand our reading as one dimension of a larger story. The advice given us is good as far as it goes, but it tells only part of the tale.

Jesus reminds us of the other side: what the young have to teach us, if we're still open to learn. Small table or big table, there's something to be gained from either one.

"I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them..."

Bless the children and bless the child in each one of us.