November 22nd, 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

I’m Not Even Sure Anymore What Season We Are In.

The 257th Day of March

Reunification

I. The Blasphemous Table

In the early to mid 1990s, American folk singer Dar Williams penned a song called, “The Christians and the Pagans”. As folk music often does, she tells a story through the melody. Jane and Amber who are pagans, call up Jane’s uncle up on Christmas Eve and they need a place to stay and her Christian uncle said that they could come, but you know, that they would be celebrating Christmas. Jane concedes, she says Christmas is like Solstice, and it’s been a while, they’ve missed each other, can they still come to stay. And her uncle and family welcome them at the table and if you listen to the whole song, you can hear the whole lovely story. Yet here’s the common chorus line that runs through the song that really puts things into perspective for me, especially as we approach the holidays. Dar sings, “So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table, finding faith and common ground the best that they were able.”

The concept of different people coming together was not only revolutionary and radical in Biblical times, but it was just as radical in the 1990s and I would dare to say that it is still radical in 2020. As we mourn and grieve, without question, about solo holidays as we seek to flatten the curve and keep others from the virus that has plagued our nation and our world, I wonder if there’s a little part of us, an honest and gruff part of us, that can admit that maybe we are slightly relieved.

Saturday Night Live and other TV shows and movies have made light of the shared family table at the holidays. We all have that uncle, that cousin, maybe ourselves, who are the odd-voice out. We might believe differently, whether that’s religiously, politically, or otherwise and whether the thoughts are kept in our heads or out at the feast at the table, we can face some uncomfortable moments. We all might share DNA at the table, and perhaps we don’t, but it is our table, it is the table where the feast is presented, and it’s the table where all God’s children will eat.

While I will miss family and friends this Thanksgiving and Christmas around a traditional dinner table, I am one of those folks that is slightly relieved. In some ways, the election season still feels like it’s upon us, I’ve never been over the moon about turkey, and the season still has its active busyness that it usually carries. But when the sun sets at 5pm, I’m alone in my studio, sometimes I am conflicted – maybe I’d rather sit amongst those I love who I do not agree with and just be together. I’ve missed hugs, I’ve missed laughter with others, the kind that makes the whole room echo, and I’ve missed solid human communication outside a telephone or a computer.

Maybe, just maybe, I miss the radical table. It is radical, because it is hard, right? It requires us to be in relationship and to feel both love and uncomfortable. But sometimes, the greatest surprises, the most intriguing mysteries, and the tales of the family come to light when we sit together.

II. The Famine and the Family

And maybe, we can learn from our text this morning, folks who were also living in dire straits and challenging times, but still learned how to live together. Instead of facing a plague or a virus, they are facing a famine, which has its own anxieties. Where will our next meal come from, will we starve, will we make it through, do we have enough money to provide for our families? Anxieties plenty.

We’ve heard in our text today, from the Message, about the family secret that comes to light over dinner. Here are brothers, coming in from Canaan, who are afraid that Joseph is going to have their head for money that was found in their sacks. Yet instead, Joseph comes in the room with gratitude and when he sees Benjamin, the youngest, he catches himself getting emotional and has to move to the other room. The brothers still do not know what is at play here, they do not know that this is actually a family dinner.

III. Forgiveness

So, after an exchange where it is thought that one of the brother’s has stolen from Joseph, Joseph opens the big news – I’m your brother that you sold into slavery. Of course the brothers are afraid, they should be, honestly, because now Joseph has some power to send them to the ends of the earth and to slavery. Yet, Joseph chooses something better, he’s able to see the bigger picture, and he embraces the brothers and releases them from their guilt. He tells them that God has something much different in store for him, and this was the path in which God needed him to go.

I would love to have that much humility, that much forgiveness running through my veins, to be able to say to those who hurt me or hurt people I love – I don’t affirm that what you did was right, but I do see how God has created good in it for me despite difficult circumstances. And I do think Joseph was still acknowledging well that his brothers did something that was wrong, that was immoral, that was a terrible choice. He wasn’t removing his brother’s from the actions that they had committed, but he had the fortitude to acknowledge that God did something good with those actions and being angry at his brothers would not do anyone any good.

III. For Reunification

We might not have the opportunity to sit around a table this year and discover how we are different, the family stories, or reunification in its own small ways this year. We do not have a table to sit around to forfeit grace, to accept our own failings, and reunify as a family, both of blood and water, once again. And we grieve that, we grieve the challenge of a table set for a small family meal instead of a feast.

But, I have to believe there is still room for reunification, for family stories, for chances of anger and for chances to forgive. Just like everything else in 2020, we are called once again to be creative, to think about how we might come together in a new way, and to adapt to new circumstances.

How, in this time where anxieties can run high and sadness can run deep, where will you find places for joy, for reunification, for rejoining and reconnecting? Will you participate in, what I am still not comfortable calling, a Zoomsgiving? Will you have the courage to try something different? Will you be inspired to seek to still have some of the family time and start some new traditions, some new ways of joining to still hear those stories or to sigh over the 3rd cousin once removed who challenges you to an unwitting debate on foreign policy? Whatever way you make before you, may God bless you as you seek how to bring the unity that this season calls for, into your homes, in new and creative ways, today. Amen.