



At A Distance – Pentecost 6 – July 12, 2020

Scriptural References: Isaiah 55: 10-13 / Psalms 65: 9-14 / Matthew 13: 18-23



“Setting the Table”

Greetings Saints. It is most excellent to be back with you again this Sunday. Mona and I are very grateful for our opportunity to return home to Montana last weekend to attend the Memorial Ceremony for Mona’s Uncle Jack Bailey at the family ranch in Lame Deer, Montana. It was a challenging trip on many levels with cancelled flights, constantly changing itineraries and alternative destinations. Yet, all that being said, the trip was beautiful from a family and spiritual perspective and deeply reinforced and reminded us of the love we have for that place. Mona and I also want to thank Martha Stephenson, Chair of All Saints Parish Life and Liturgy Teams for her beautiful and deeply spiritual homily message last Sunday. We had the opportunity to join you all virtually last Sunday on Facebook Live from Lame Deer. It was excellent to be on the “other side of the screen” and to be a part of All Saints’ Virtual Congregation. Thank you also to Ann Hassler for presiding over the Liturgy of the Word service last week in such a professional and spiritual way. Thank you, Ann and Martha and all of the All Saints Worship Team!

Saints, this morning we are gifted with some beautiful Sacred Stories to speak about. We will explore the Isaiah reading, our Psalm, and Matthew’s Parable of the Sower in some depth in this mornings message entitled “Setting the Table.”

Growing up, one of the family traditions that I remember with great fondness is “setting the table.” It was very important for my parents that we share the dinner table together every night, not only to eat together but to share the occurrences, challenges and successes that the day presented.

This tradition of setting the table was actually quite structured. Certainly not like the Japanese Tea Ceremony, but things had their correct and proper places and woe to the child who deviated from the template. My mother was not looking for creativity when setting the family table. She did not want to “look for things,” everything had a particular spot where it belonged. Our family - and our table - was certainly not elegant. The tablecloth was oilskin, the dishes were Melmac, utensils mismatched but functional. No crystal adorned the place settings. Just mismatched jelly and pickle jars for glasses. Yet, there was a certain hopefulness for the meal and conversations to come, and the act of setting the table both respected and raised up the little celebration of the day which followed. Setting the table became a ritualistic, anticipatory act of faith to what would come later, a sort of familial glue that we could count on if everything else that day had a “comeapart.”

This tradition of setting the table continued generationally with my family. Our daughters loved to place the dishes and cutlery with precision again in anticipation of the sharing and community, and the “being fed” that came next. One of the things that we learned quickly when we moved to the Dominican Republic, is that the tradition of communal dining and ritual setting of the table is not universal. In the DR, the only day that families eat together is Christmas Eve. On all other days the food is in a pot on the stove and when you are hungry you go and get some, find a place to sit usually on the porch and eat. To me it often felt more like a fuel stop than a meal. When our Dominican adopted son Isauro joined our family, he was amazed that we ate together as a family every day. He told me one time, “Papa, one of the things that I love about being a part of this family is that every day feels like Christmas.” We all have a place at the table!

In today's sacred stories I get that same anticipatory tingling about what is going on, as I get when our table is set. The anticipation, the hope of something good and delicious and wonderful is about to be placed before us. Something substantial to feed us in body, mind and spirit as individuals each with our own

place setting but around a large, inclusive and welcoming table. We all get to "dish up" as Grandma Dorothy would say; sit together as people and as family.

In today's sacred stories, water and rain are everywhere, in Isaiah and in our Psalm, wetting of the land, making lushness and fertile places for germinating and growing of spiritual food to sustain us. And then the gospel of the Sower, a classic some seeds falling on hardpack, some in the thistles and weeds getting choked out and some thankfully falling on wet, nutrient filled good dirt. Good wet, black dirt with the worms popping up out of it. Creator is setting the table...making things ready, preparing us for a bounty that is waiting...piping hot and ready to be served up.

The learning for me in this, Saints, that as I look at what is all around us, I have come to realize that Creator does not always "set the table" in the same way. Sometimes we get locked into a particular way that the table has to look. Ritualized, stylistic, traditional, elegant. Sometimes we get locked into the thinking that it is only this Table, this altar here in Church that has the ability to connect us to Creator and Jesus. Yes, while it is true that the connective power of the Eucharistic Table is strong and consistent...it is by no means the only way we have for connecting to Creator and Spirit.

Last week as Mona and I were driving through the green and well-watered eastern Montana rolling hills, we got to experience the lushness and richness of Creator's table differently. In Psalm 65 this morning we hear:

"You make the dawn and the dusk to sing for joy.

9 You visit the earth and water it abundantly;

*you make it very plenteous; **

the river of God is full of water.

*10 You prepare the grain, **

for so you provide for the earth.

*11 You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges; **

with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase.

*12 You crown the year with your goodness, **

and your paths overflow with plenty.

*13 May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing, **

and the hills be clothed with joy.

*14 May the meadows cover themselves with flocks,
and the valleys cloak themselves with grain; *
let them shout for joy and sing.”*

As we rolled through the landscape filled with pastures of baled and rolled hay from the first-cut of summer. We saw Creator’s table set for us and we connected. As the Angus, and Herefords and Charolais cattle that grazed lazily in the summer afternoon, we saw Creator’s table set for us and we connected. As we drove through the pelting black sky hailstorm, we felt Creator’s presence. Our Indigenous Relatives remind us that we can find Creator’s invitation to dine with us anywhere. In the wind-blown trees and waving grass. In the colorful and inviting majesty of a single flower. Our dog, gently dropping a fetching stick on our shoe. In the eyes of our beloved one or a stranger.

The Table is being set always and everywhere by our Creator, inviting us to join and partake and be filled, in familiar places like church, and in unique, creative and remote places that suddenly emerge and surprise us. Our job is to pay attention for all of these opportunities to be fed in mind, body and spirit. Creator has set the table gloriously, now we just need to dish-up, sit down, and enjoy.