

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
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10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Creating the Table and Calling it Good”

First sermon in the 5-week series: *A Place at the Table*

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a

New Revised Standard Version

In the endless confusion and ever-changing guidelines of the chaos that is our lives in the pandemic, the rhythmic pace of the creation story in Genesis 1 feels kind of soothing, doesn't it? Almost like harkening back to a day when we thought we could predict and order our lives? Which was always an illusion, of course, but it was an illusion that we really liked!..to feel like we had some measure of control over what happened in our life, or that we could plan for a future that would actual unfold as we had planned it to unfold!

In fact, the rhythm and structure of the first Creation story in Genesis is so comforting and ordering that it's almost like setting a table...a Table where everything has its place and its purpose.

First – God shook out a huge creamy yellow cloth and draped it across the table and unfurled a thin midnight blue-black table runner that ran the length of the

table spilling over the edges. God smoothed out the wrinkles, smiled and said, “yep, that contrast is good...it works well.”

Second – God set down a huge bowl as a center piece – made of beautiful hues of green, teal, aquamarine, and turquoise blue sea glass, filled it with water and shells, and then scooped out some smaller bowls of water to put along the table runner. God dipped a finger in the cool pools of water and thought, “That is refreshingly good!”

Third – God unfolded some woven, textured placemats – and set them carefully, one by one across and around the table. And in front of each placemat, God put a cute mini succulent. Looking up and down the table, God added a bowl of lemons and limes on one end and some apples and Clementines on the other. God sprinkled sunflower seeds and raisins and nuts up and down the table runner, and enjoyed a handful as a snack,

and as God chewed, God said, “Umm hmm...this looks (and tastes!) good.”

Fourth – God changed out the 40 watt light bulb in the ceiling centerpiece for a brighter LED version that had dimming capabilities, then strung some twinkly Christmas lights down the edges of the table, and then dropped some floating tea lights in the bowls of water, and oohed and aahed and said, “That is *nice*; the warmth and the hues of a variety of lights is good.”

Fifth – God started setting out the plates – every piece different – mismatched from who knows where – a white modern square plate, an antique blue china plate, a Winnie the Pooh plastic plate with dividers, a swirled pottery plate with earthy tones. The silverware was the same way – every piece different from somebody’s yard sale or their grandmother’s collection, and same thing with the napkin rings and salt shakers and gravy bowls. All kinds of different things – big and small, plastic and wood, silver and ceramic. God looked around and laughed and kept adding more and more and said – “the more the merrier...good upon good upon good.”

Sixth – God started setting out all the food on the table – potluck style, appetizers and entrees, pallet cleansers and desserts. Casseroles and bread baskets and veggie trays and cheese boards. God kept getting more and more excited with each dish on the table – this was looking (and smelling) really, *really* good.

And then – God started welcoming people to the table. People of all colors, shapes, and sizes. Old people, young people. High chairs and wheelchairs. People who spoke all kinds of languages and wore all kinds of clothes. As they ate and dined and laughed and told stories together (and as puppies picked up their crumbs) God saw that they were having such a good time and said, “yes, yes, yes – this is good, heart-warmingly, soul-stretchingly good.”

God kept bringing out more food and more people kept coming and God moved around the table – chatting and conversing with everyone – asking if they needed anymore bread and wine and every time the bread was broken and the wine poured – God felt the blessing overflowing in the room and the beauty of this grand dinner party.

Seventh – God was tired. In that really good, satisfying tired kind of way after you’ve thrown a really great party. But God didn’t want to stop the party so let the people continue to gather and serve and eat and share with one another – and God slipped up to bed to rest.

Everyone had a place at the table, and it was all good. Really good. If creating the world was like setting a table – perhaps it would have looked something like that according to Genesis 1 (and my imagination!) Ordered, yet creative. Full, yet always room for more.

As we’ll see over the weeks to come, tables are central in Scripture¹ and they are central in our lives. Think about all of the tables in your everyday life. Where do you stand and sit? Where do you serve and let yourself be served? Where do you work and collaborate, stress and problem solve? Where do you prop your feet up or lay down your essential everyday items? What do you wipe and

clean, set and re-set? Where do you converse and share stories, journal, or zoom, or sit in silence with your cup of coffee?

Bedside tables, breakfast tables, coffee tables, side tables, dining tables, conference tables, cocktail tables, picnic tables, cafeteria tables, science lab tables, craft tables, woodshop and workshop tables, puzzle tables, card tables, candle lighting tables, or even virtual tables – Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams – and then there are makeshift tables – picnic blankets, and TV trays, high chair trays and airplane tray tables.

Tables are *everywhere*. This week, pay attention to all the tables that you stand beside, sit behind, prop your feet up on, or set your stuff on. Count them. See how many tables are a part of your world. And then – go a little deeper.

What tables make you feel welcome, like your voice is heard and valued? What tables have no room for you, or make

¹ In Scripture, Tables are places of meetings and conversations, reconciliations and forgiveness, negotiations and blessings. Jesus sits at other people’s tables, turns over tables that make him mad, reclines at Passover tables, shares bread and wine even to those who will betray him. Jesus uses Tables to speak in his parables, wedding feasts are used as metaphor for the kin-dom of God – the heavenly banquet table, and it’s at

a table in the breaking of bread that Jesus is recognized by the disciples who hadn’t recognized him on the road to Emmaus. The early church breaks bread around tables as a central act of worship – and of course Jesus asks us to remember him – at a table – again and again and again.

no room for you? What tables render you invisible even though you are there? What tables do you pull up extra chairs to to make room for more people? What tables do you save places at for your friends so you don't leave any room for potential strangers (or annoying people) to join you? What tables are *you* always serving? What tables are the ones where you are *served*? What tables do you pay bills at or negotiate hard deals at, and what tables are full of stories, laughter, and connection?

Our theme this year is *A Place at the Table*. As many of you heard at the ministry fair or you can read about in our Order of Worship, we'll explore this theme in a variety of ways for the next nine months. But we begin with just noticing the tables in our midst and what we do at them and whether or not we feel like we have a purposeful place at them. And I'll give you a theological hint – all year we're going to see how finding our place at the table and making room for others at the table is a metaphor for what we do at The Lord's Table – when we celebrate communion. Just as Jesus was eating a meal when he took bread, broke bread, blessed bread, and gave

bread to his disciples and friends, saying "remember me" – we remember that at ALL the tables in our lives (the fun ones and the serious ones) – we, too, are taken, broken, blessed, and given. Some tables break us more than bless us. At some tables we are taken in and at other tables we give up seats make room for more. But these actions – of being taken, broken, blessed, and given – they can happen at *any* Table.

And so our hope throughout this year as we live into this theme of *A Place at the Table* is that we will all begin to see how our place at the Table and everyone's place at the Table is inevitably tied to *this* Table – the Lord's Table – and to the connection we experience here of God's grace and love and the call we have to share that grace and love with others. And we're gonna do that by gathering around really ordinary tables – having fun, playing games, sharing stories – whether you are part of the Table Topics groups or utilize your Table Talk box in another small group or with your family and friends (both of which are explained in your Gathering Sunday bag). Essentially, this year, we want to connect around the "Table" – a lot. This can happen virtually

or it can happen in person. Because, of course, the “Table” is simply a metaphor for the place where we come together – with intention and with connection...connection to God, to others, to ourselves.

As we begin this theme, we also begin with the Narrative Lectionary again – our third year – and this year we are in the cycle that will lead us to John’s Gospel – the gospel writer who had his own creation story, saying, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth,”* (John 1:1-5, 14).

In the beginning was the Word. John’s gospel hearkens back to the Genesis words “in the beginning” - when the words of the Divine spoke creation into being and called it good.

God called creation Good as it was being created. And now, we kind of idealize these early days

of the created world as a “Garden of Eden” or a perfection that we will never know again – because of population growth and global warming and famine and terrorism and wars over scarcity of resources and religious difference and fear. We think that we can never set the Table quite like God did in those first seven days of Creation. Our world is forever tainted. It’ll never get that good again. But is that true?

Because if we follow this metaphor of God creating the world being like God setting a Table, we have to wonder – where did the actual Table that God set at creation come from? Before God can set the Table, there has to be a Table, right? But what exactly is this Table? What’s it made of?

Well, in verse 2 we read that *“the earth was a formless void”* which in Hebrew is *tohu va-bohu*; it has many meanings including: “chaos,” “confusion,” “waste place,” “formless,” “futile,” “emptiness,” “nothingness,” “watery waste.” Essentially as one scholar says, “the unit, *tohu vabohu*, seems to suggest something that is more than simply passive or powerless. It points to what is

beyond human control, to that which has power and potential to threaten or to act [with confusion or chaos].”²

So this chaotic and confused void was covering all the earth; it was everywhere and on everything, completely enveloping whatever else was or wasn’t, and “*a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*” This word *wind* is the Hebrew word *ruach* – also means breath or spirit (it’s basically something infused with divine presence) and this *ruach* “sweeps” over the chaos, confusion, emptiness, void. The word for sweeps in Hebrew is *merahefet*, which really is more accurately translated as “hovers, flutters, or moves”³ – it’s a bit different than the Greek *pneuma* spirit we know about sweeping over people at Pentecost – *ruach* is something more organic, more subtlety connected to God’s very breath and being, so much so that it hover and flutters, rather than dominates and knocks over.

So we have the *ruach* of God – the breath/wind/spirit of God – *merahafet-ing* or hovering and fluttering and moving over the

tohu vabohu – the chaos and confusion and emptiness that is reality...and this gets creation going but then shortly after that we get another Hebrew word (I promise this is the last one for today!) *rakia*, which is translated as “dome” – and makes me think of the Astrodome or some kind of sports arena that is enclosed and can protect the field when it rains, but that can be opened up if you want to let in fresh air and light.

So this *rakia* this dome – feels kind of sci-fi-esque to me because, as biblical scholar, Karla Suomala, describes, when *rakia* is translated as dome (as it is repeatedly throughout this passage) it gives this image of God blowing a giant “bubble” that floats around in the middle of the watery chaos/confusion/emptiness – almost as if all of creation takes place in this dome, or bubble, *apart from* the chaos, confusion, void, emptiness. As Suomala says, “*it’s like God is blowing a bubble in the midst of watery chaos. Once the bubble is in place, life can develop in an orderly and systematic way. As the passage proceeds, God*

² Karla Suomala, “Commentary on Genesis 1:1—2:4a,” *Working Preacher* (8 Sept. 2013), accessed on Sept. 12, 2021 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrativ>

e-lectionary/creation-3/commentary-on-genesis-11-31-21-4-3.

³ Suomala, *ibid.*

connects growth and abundance to order, finally commanding creation 'to be fruitful and multiply.' – [all within this bubble].”⁴

And even more, in other places in scripture, Suomala points out that *rakia* is not translated as dome (as in ‘bubble’), but rather as “firmament” or “vault” – which point to a more solid and even more impermeable barrier between “creation” and “chaos” –reinforcing a theology that the goal of faith is to live our lives in such a way that keeps chaos at bay. Chaos is surrounding our bubble with God, but not penetrating it,⁵ so as long as we’re in the bubble of bliss, we are protected from the craziness outside of the bubble.⁶

However – and this is key: words such as “dome” and “firmament” are not the only way to translate *rakia*; it is also often translated as “*porous expanse*” – which is far more vague and may imply a less solid and more fluid boundary between the earth and the watery chaos beyond.”⁷ In this understanding of the word, there isn’t a clear separation between “chaos” and “creation” – which

is helpful because an image of creation in some kind of bubble, with chaos on the outside doesn’t really reflect our lived experience, does it? Nor, perhaps, does it reflect God’s intent for us as God’s creation.⁸ Chaos, confusion, and emptiness are much closer to us than we would like to admit. Days like 9/11 make that truth impossible to ignore. Our lived reality is that creation includes chaos, it doesn’t exclude it.

It is tempting to put all of our energy into setting up barriers (artificial ones, certainly) to keep our loved ones and ourselves safe. Perhaps it does work sometimes. But other times it doesn’t. I guess the deeper question is, do we spend our lives trying to create a stable and safe Table in a bubble by fighting chaos with every fiber of our being? Or do we see that the very Table itself is a fluid expanse...more porously existing within chaos, even perhaps at times, made of chaos itself – rather than 100% oak wood or bullet proof steel?

Perhaps it is *not* the absence of chaos that is the Table of God’s Creation – but rather – perhaps

⁴ Suomala, *ibid.*

⁵ Suomala, *ibid.*

⁶ Suomala, *ibid.*

⁷ Suomala, *ibid.*

⁸ Suomala, *ibid.*

the very Table that God creates for us to gather around and co-create around – is actually made the some of the same stuff of chaos and craziness itself?!

And maybe what makes the Table of Creation one that we can gather around and find our place at is not about it being made with perfection or an illusion of whatever protects us from the outside world, but what if what makes the Table of Creation one we gather around and one that we call GOOD – is the fact that *ruach* is hovering around it and moving through us who are gathered around it?

What if when we think of the Table God creates for us – we don't even think about what the Table is made of or where it's placed, per se, but rather, what *ruach* – what divine wind/breath/spirit is sweeping and swirling around it through us – we who are gathered there? And what if it is the breath/wind/spirit of God IN us and in ALL creation that makes God say, over and over again, “it is good.”? What if it's not the LACK of chaos that makes our Table Gathering good, but rather the presence of the Divine? The *ruach* in you and in

me? Because if that's the case – it's not just good for God, it's good news for us! Because that means that no matter what is happening in our lives or in the world, we still have the ability to be co-creators with God – as long as we tap into and recognize that *ruach* hovering around us and within us.

What if it is the Spirit of God, the Wind of God, blowing, breathing, and hovering about us that gives order and meaning to the chaos – creating the Table on which we can set our lives, the Table that can remind us of goodness?

In this paradigm, life and chaos are in a more symbiotic relationship than an oppositional one; they are both part of the same fabric of creation.⁹ As Suomala asks, “What if the *rakia* (the dome in Genesis 1 is not as fixed and perfect as we thought – in a bubble), but what if it creates a porous space in the midst of chaos in which humans live in relationship with what we cannot control as opposed to constantly fighting against it?”¹⁰

So think about all the tables where you sit and stand and work and eat and play and

⁹ Suomala, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Suomala, *ibid.*

converse and collaborate and argue and negotiate and reflect and laugh – think about all these ordinary tables – and not-so-ordinary tables, like the Table of our Lord – NOT as places that are chaos free, but as places where you can invite the Spirit and Breath and Wind of God to breathe into your life and move through you in such a way that creative and healing and hopeful things happen? Or Goodness happens!? Can we trust that God is hovering around and about us, breathing in us, moving through us? Could the tables we gather around serve as reminders for us, places of grounding and regrouping, in the otherwise chaos-y swirling waters of our lives and the world?

In that case – we can think of initial act of Creation not just as the Table that God set for the whole world to come into motion once and for all – but as a model of all the tables God is continuing to set in our lives and that God calls us to set? Perhaps *A Place at the Table* isn't just about a physical table, as much as it is a spiritual presence and state of being.

What if every time we gather with others, every time we find our place at any table...what if God sees that and calls that

good? *Very* good, in fact! What if we saw our vocations as God's beloved as being ones who find our place at the table and invite others to do the same – and when we do so – we call it good too? And not just call it good – but we see the good in the faces of those around us – and create some good together?

Perhaps all we need to do to make any Table “the Lord's Table” or a Table of Creation Goodness – is to invite God's wind/breath/spirit into our being and into our presence and to see that wind/breath/spirit hovering around and coming from others. At your breakfast table, around the game table, on your craft or woodshop table, at your friends' dining table, in your virtual zoom table, around your business conference table...wherever you go – can you invite the Spirit of God to hover and bring creativity and intentional presence and welcome? Not to calm or clean up the chaos, but to be present with you in it?

Because to create Tables where God is present and where everybody has a place...is indeed an image of God's kingdom come...

Amen.