

THE CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*“THE LARGEST TABLE EFFECT”*

PREACHING TO CULTIVATE COMPASSION, JUSTICE, AND INCLUSION  
IN THE URBAN CHURCH

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*To the people of St. John's Church  
and the people who gather at The Largest Table, and at every table ...*

*and for my Dad, Raphael O. Nystrand,  
who taught me about leadership, the value of community, and the dignity of every human  
being by the way he lived his life*

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## ABSTRACT

Title: “*The Largest Table Effect*”: Preaching to Cultivate Compassion, Justice, and Inclusion in the Urban Church

This research explores how preachers can help listeners create a new productive reality, so that they are able to reflect upon it and act with compassion, justice, and inclusion. An urban congregation participated in a two-year study to change its understanding and experience of communion from being individual-centered to being community-centered. Results indicate that, over time, this effort may lead to a change in the congregational mythos and identity. The implications for this study are pertinent for all preachers, especially those who serve urban congregations.

an open door  
a warm welcome  
a home-cooked meal  
a table to which all are invited  
a message of uncompromising inclusion  
an invitation to experience God's presence  
and the opportunity to share God's love  
in the middle of the day  
in the middle of the week  
in the middle of the city<sup>1</sup>

*The Largest Table*

**Introduction**

*The Largest Table* is an experience that has changed my life and the way I see the world. For almost five years, St. John's Church, an urban congregation in Columbus, Ohio where I am the senior minister, has hosted a weekly worship service with communion on Wednesdays called *The Largest Table* that is followed by a community lunch. This ministry, initially designed with the vision of creating a community where there were no barriers, has grown and contributed to the transformation and diversity that is occurring in all of our ministries.

Originally formed in 1872 as a German immigrant congregation, we have become increasingly diverse. While the congregation continues to be primarily Caucasian, we are increasing our diversity socio-economically, as well as in sexual, political, and theological orientations.

A challenge before us, as articulated in the church's recently adopted three-year plan, is to transition *The Largest Table* from being simply one of our programs to

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Raabe, *The Largest Table: Meeting Christ in Community*, Columbus, OH, 2005.

defining who we are as a congregation and as community members. I believe one way to accomplish this is through the foundational experience and reflection on what “community” really means—to be in communion with each other.

The focus of this thesis is to determine the answer to the following question: *How can I preach about communion in a way that broadens the hearer’s experience of the sacrament to include compassion, justice, and inclusion?* I am interested in the answer to this question because I believe that as our experience of the sacrament of communion deepens and becomes more central to us as a community, our experience of and our commitment to the community within and beyond St. John’s walls will also deepen. I believe preaching is a tool that can facilitate this deepening experience.

### **Word and Sacrament**

Both Word and Sacrament are essential to the worship experience. Through preaching, the preacher proclaims God’s Word for a specific time and a specific community. Through the sacraments, God’s presence and God’s grace is made visible in very tangible ways. It is one thing to proclaim that “there is no place where God is not,” and that “there is nothing that anyone can do to separate themselves from the love of God”; it is quite another to usher someone into an experience of that reality.

In the United Church of Christ we recognize only two sacraments: baptism and communion. However, my experiences of “visible signs of an inward grace,” as sacraments are classically defined by Augustine, have broadened my understanding of what sacraments might include. Much, if not most, of our lives can be understood as

sacramental. Worship is a place where individuals can begin to think about, experience, and articulate how God is present and active in every part of life.

Augustine, in writing about how to introduce people to the Christian faith, wrote about the importance of providing some instruction about the sacraments:

*On the subject of the sacrament, indeed, which he receives, it is first to be well impressed upon his notice that the signs of divine things are, it is true, things visible, but that the invisible things themselves are also honored in them, and that species, which is then sanctified by the blessing, is therefore not to be regarded merely in the way in which it is regarded in any common use. And thereafter he ought to be told what is also signified by the form of words to which he has listened, and what in him is seasoned by that (spiritual grace) of which this material substance presents the emblem.<sup>2</sup>*

In other words, our experience can be aided by the help of some interpretation and explanation. While I strongly believe that even the smallest child can experience the gift of bread and cup as gifts of love, I also have come to appreciate that the community can greatly benefit from some guidance about their experience. Just as the preacher attempts to give voice to how God is active in the world and in our everyday experiences, the preacher can help add depth to the congregations' understanding and experience of the sacrament by articulating how God is present in the sacrament of communion.

### **A Growing Understanding of the Sacrament of Communion**

Why the focus on communion? If someone would have told me ten years ago that I would be writing a thesis about preaching on the sacrament of communion, I would not have believed it. Up until the last five years my feelings about, and my experience with,

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<sup>2</sup>Augustine, De Catechizandis Rudibus , <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1303.htm> (accessed April 6, 2009).

the sacrament of communion have been ambivalent at best. I did not have any exposure to communion as a young child, because I went to church where Sunday school was held for children during the entire worship service. My first memories of communion were in middle school and high school when I began worshipping regularly with my parents. I can remember thinking of communion as an annoyance when I was a youth and young adult. Rather than as an integrated part of the worship experience, communion felt like it was “tacked on,” making services drone on to the point that I, who always loved going to church, wished that I had stayed home to avoid the monotony of an empty ritual.

I believe the ritual felt empty because the only explanations I received for communion were that (1) the bread represented Christ’s body and the juice resembled Christ’s blood and (2) this ritual was supposed to help us remember Jesus and know that we are forgiven for whatever we are doing wrong. None of this resonated with me, and so I felt like I was just “going through the motions,” and it appeared to me as though all of the people around me were “going through the motions” as well.

I remember thinking that there must be more creative and meaningful ways we could remember the life of Jesus, and that while I knew I was not perfect, forgiveness did not seem to be the primary thing I needed from my religious experience. As a youth, I was looking for challenge and direction more than seeking forgiveness.

My earliest meaningful experience with communion happened at our church campground during a high school retreat on World Communion Sunday. I can still remember the crisp air, the brilliant colors of the trees, and the circle that our group had

formed for the culminating event that marked the end of a fabulous weekend. None of us wanted to go home; we wanted this weekend to last forever.

Together, we sang *Morning Has Broken* to the accompaniment of a guitar, and then our youth pastor told us to hold hands. We stood there in a circle, feeling our connection with each other. We stood there, hand in hand, and listened to our youth pastor. I don't remember the specific words he used, but I remember that he highlighted how our sense of connection had deepened over the weekend. While we would soon go back to our homes and to our own schools and, over time, we would have our differences, we had one thing in common. Our faith and our commitment to love as God loves and to follow in the way of Jesus would be what held us together. He went on to talk about how we were about to take communion, but we wouldn't be the only ones eating the bread and drinking the cup at that specific time. It was World Communion Sunday. On that one day Christians in all parts of the world—Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, or UCC—would all be doing the same thing. It was one way all Christians everywhere could stand in one giant global circle of solidarity. I got that. That moment was powerful, and that experience has stayed with me. Communion on World Communion Sunday would not be an annoyance any more.

To be honest, though, that was the only Sunday of the year I got excited about taking communion. Whether communion was passed through the pews or we went forward for intinction, I continued to feel like I was “going through the motions” with this sacrament well into my adult years. I believe I was in my late thirties when I heard a

minister in my congregation<sup>3</sup> refer to the communion table as “the largest table.” I liked that. Those few words helped to open up my experience with this sacrament.

“The largest table” resonated with my understanding of connecting Christians all over the globe. Those three little words challenged me to think about including people who were different from me, as well as incorporating children as valued members of the community. At “The Largest Table in the World” there is room for everyone. Little did I know how large the table would become and how my experience at it would forever change the way I saw and experienced God and the world around me.

### *The Largest Table*

In 2003, Nancy Raabe, who was a student intern for St. John’s at the time, came to me with the idea of providing a mid-week worship service with a free community meal to follow. She had a vision of creating a community where there were no barriers, and all people would greet one another with unconditional love and acceptance. At the time, it was a radical concept for our mostly aging, white, middle-class congregation. As the vision became a reality, we needed to give it a name, and the name *The Largest Table* seemed to fit. Because these were also the words I used in the invitation to communion,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I believe this was the Rev. Dr. Richard Wing at First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio.

<sup>4</sup> Following is my typical invitation to communion, adapted, the United Church of Christ Book of Worship  
*“This may look like a small table, but it is the largest table in the world. It is open to everyone here, especially the stranger. For we believe that it is in breaking bread together that we come to know the living Christ. Even the smallest child can understand, “take, eat, this is for you,” as an act of love. So, come to this table not because you must, but because you may. Come not to express an opinion or to voice a complaint, but to seek a presence and pray for a Spirit. Come not because you are fulfilled, but because before God you stand in need of mercy and assurance. Come, then, however it is that you are, and know that God came in the form of Jesus the Christ to share our common lot and to invite us to bring about the world that God intends.”*

it also seemed appropriate to serve communion at this weekly worship service. As we began this new worship service, for the first time, communion felt like an integral and important part of the worship experience.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past five years I have done much work with this image of “the largest table in the world,” and my own experience of *The Largest Table* has worked on me. I have wondered about whether others have also felt as though communion was a “tacked on” part of the service and, if so, why? Do many see communion as a private and solemn rite rather than the joyful feast of God? I also have wondered about why there is such disagreement about who should be welcome at the table. I have thought about various styles of communion and have wondered about how style and frequency affect our experience. I have pondered the question of how members of my own congregation have understood and experienced the sacrament and what has shaped their understandings.

As I have been asking these questions of scholars and members of my own congregation, I have also been experiencing the sacrament every week with a growing group of diverse people who, for a few hours in the middle of the week and in the middle of the city, are joined together in community to feed and be fed. With every passing week, my experience and the importance of this ritual deepen within me.

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Miles, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* (Ballentine Books: New York) 2003. There continues to be much debate among Protestants about who is “welcome” at the table. There is debate about whether children should be welcome and/or those who have not been baptized. I have taken the position that ALL are welcome. My passion around this has grown and has recently been further inspired by the writings of Sara Miles who demonstrates through her writing how a stranger can come to recognize the living Christ through this sacrament.

## Historical Views of Communion

Laurence Hull Stookey, in his book *Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church*, provides a thorough outline of how people's understanding and experience of the sacrament have changed through the generations. Stookey describes the full-meal pot-lucks that are described by Paul as having taken place in Corinth. He describes the medieval times when the priest stood with his back to the congregation and took the sacrament while the congregation looked on, as well as the period of the Reformation when the sacrament varied greatly in practice and began to be thought of as "Christ's reward to deserving individuals within the Church."<sup>6</sup> Stookey further describes the present time of "liturgical renewal" in which there has been an attempt to simplify the sacrament and make it more accessible.

This rich history illustrates why many people today perceive the sacrament of communion to be a private ritual that is about asking Jesus to forgive their personal sins. Despite recent efforts to emphasize that the sacrament of communion is a resurrection meal, for many persons the sacrament has been and continues to be linked more with Good Friday than with the many other times in scripture that Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of the bread.<sup>7</sup>

Dennis Smith notes that scholarship on the Eucharist has been "deceptively narrow."<sup>8</sup> Smith points to two scholars (Joachim Jeremias and Hans Lietzmann) who, while drawing different conclusions, both try to determine the origin of the Eucharist

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1993) 41-93

<sup>7</sup> Stookey, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 4-5.

meal by analyzing the historical data in light of the meal. Jeremias traces the Eucharist back to the Passover. Lietzmann makes no reference to the Passover, but works backward by analyzing Eucharist liturgy by tracing it back to different original meals.

Smith takes a different approach. By studying the common banquet tradition, rather than specific meals (i.e., the Passover, everyday meals, or funeral banquets), Smith sees how liturgy grew out of these experiences. This demonstrates how the church would ignite the imagination to help individuals relate their secular experience with the sacred and their common meals with holy ones. However, early Christians were made up of different groups who experienced banquets differently, and so different groups adapted the liturgy to fit their experiences in different ways.<sup>9</sup>

We could say that with our history of diverse practices and shifting theology, it is difficult to know what we are supposed to believe about communion. We could also say that because many Protestants tend to celebrate communion infrequently, it feels more awkward when they do. Both of these responses are plausible answers to why the sacrament often feels “tacked on” to a service and holds little meaning for numbers of people.

While these answers may be true, in part, Monika K. Hellwig, author of *The Eucharist and The Hunger of the World*, offers a reason that feels more compelling to me. Hellwig suggests that our movement away from communion is not because we do not understand the theology or the symbolism. Hellwig suggests that the reason many people do not embrace the sacrament is because we have never understood the meaning

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<sup>9</sup>Smith, 2-6.

of communion on a foundational level.<sup>10</sup> To make her point, Hellwig shares a story from the Hassidic tradition of eastern European Judaism,

*In the days of Baal Shem Tov, the saintly founder of this particular tradition of Hassidism, it would happen that he would take his disciples into a quiet spot in the forest. There they would make a fire, and dancing around that fire the Baal Shem Tov would lead his disciples in the most sublime prayers, lifting them, so to speak, out of themselves in ecstasy.... After the death of the saint, the disciples continued to go to that spot in the forest, to light the fire, to dance. But they could not remember how to pray, and their excursions were not the same. Indeed, in the course of time they forgot to dance, and later they no longer lit the fire. Eventually even the place of encounter was forgotten. An era had passed and an experience was now lost.<sup>11</sup>*

Hellwig further explains:

*This story ... is about every religious tradition. It is about every kind of discipleship. It is also about our Christian experience and the Eucharist. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has shown us a place of encounter with God, a place that must be reached by special effort, like the place in the forest. He has kindled a fire for us that mediates the presence of God, and has shown us how to return again and rekindle it and enter anew into that moment ... The problem, after many generations ... is to “remember” that inner core of the experience and the action which cannot be written down.*

If we try to “remember” something that we never really got in the first place, our rituals become empty and meaningless.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Role of Personal Experience**

Hellwig’s illustration points to the importance of experience. My personal experience with this sacrament, especially through my participation at *The Largest Table*, has helped to shape the meaning of communion for me. I have come to know Christ and

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<sup>10</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (Sheed & Ward: Kansas City, 1992) vi.

<sup>11</sup> Hellwig, viii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

what it means to be the body of Christ, not by going through the motions of an empty ritual, but through engaging in powerful experiences that have been linked to this sacrament.

When *The Largest Table* began, I brought my previous experiences with me (such as my camp experience on World Communion Sunday). I found myself reflecting on the comments my youth pastor made relating communion to community. Suddenly, this made more sense than ever!

My past experiences with this sacrament were the backdrop for me as I began to reflect on and interpret the liturgy of our weekly mid-week service, alongside and in light of my experience of breaking bread with others at our weekly lunch. The long-term result has been a deep and multi-faceted experience and understanding of this sacrament that has not only shaped how I understand the sacrament of communion, but also the world in which we live. My specific experience is, of course, unique to me. Unfortunately, the level of participation and engagement I have experienced has not been experienced by everyone in our congregation.

This became an important point for me and for our congregation. Though many of us were having transforming experiences on Wednesdays, much of the congregation was not present with us during those experiences. With each passing week, the sacrament was becoming more important to me. Through my experience, the meaning of the sacrament grew and began to symbolize not only God's love for me and the world, but also a way of life that was marked by justice, compassion, and inclusion. I wanted the entire congregation to share my experience, and this prompted an initial question:

*How can I get the entire congregation to see communion as a way of life marked by justice, compassion, and inclusion?* This question then led to the idea that, as a preacher, I could use language to recreate the experience for those who had not experienced our Wednesday worship. Thus, prompted the question of my thesis: *How can I preach about communion in a way that broadens the hearer's experience of the sacrament to include compassion, justice, and inclusion*<sup>13</sup>? Theodore W. Jennings described a model based on the theory of symbolic logic that provided my answer.

### **Jennings' Model of Experience, Imagination, and Reflection**

I am aware that my own personal experience with *The Largest Table*, and the sacrament of communion invited me to imagine and think about communion and community in new ways. My new understanding didn't happen overnight. It did not happen because I read or was told about a new meaning for communion. My new understanding came gradually as I had different experiences and found myself making new connections. I reasoned that if I were able to grow in this way, others could, too.

Might I be able to preach in a way that awakened the rest of the congregation to their own visceral experiences of connection and community and its theological ties to "communion?" At an intuitive level I recognized that this would be easiest for those who had experienced *The Largest Table* firsthand and much more difficult for those who did not have firsthand experience; through my preaching I would need to help them imagine

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<sup>13</sup> Just as scripture is polyvalent, so is the sacrament of communion. While there are many meanings for this sacrament, for the purpose of this thesis I focus primarily on compassion, justice, and inclusion. See Table 1 for my analysis of some of the meaning portrayed in the table fellowship scenes in Luke. This table would provide a great starter for discussion of what the sacrament of communion may mean for us, and what it might not.

it. If I were successful, people would engage in a reflective process through which they would see and feel the links between personal experiences of connection/community, the sacrament of communion, and the larger “world communion.” If my preaching REALLY worked, they would be moved to act on the experiences and deepen their connections throughout their daily and congregational lives.

Theodore W. Jennings<sup>14</sup> put what I had sensed on an intuitive level into a cognitive model. Jennings explores the roles of experience, the imagination, and reflection by placing them in a three-story house. In the basement is “experience.” On the first floor is “imagination”; the second floor is “reflection” (see Figure 1). Jennings’ illustration serves to demonstrate that lived experience is available to us only if we are able to transform it into symbolic forms, especially language. If a person wants to reflect on an experience, he or she can do so only from how it lives in his or her imagination. Jennings’ model provides a mechanism for transforming my experience into language that ignites the imagination of those who have not physically experienced *The Largest Table* so that they are able to enter into the experience of, and have reflection upon, what *The Largest Table* is truly about.

Ultimately, however, the goal is not for the congregation simply to have deeper and more meaningful reflection. The goal for the congregation is to become *The Largest Table* so that its spirit and meaning permeates all members’ actions; that is, all events and tasks in which they engage intentionally demonstrate compassion, justice, and inclusion.

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<sup>14</sup> Theodore W. Jennings, *Introduction to Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976).

Jennings is a theologian, and so it makes sense that his model stops with our thoughts and reflection. For me, because I am a pastor, theologizing isn't the end point. The end point is what we do with our beliefs and how we live out our faith in the world. For that reason, I have added a roof to Jennings' model, and my goal is to help our congregation get out of the house and climb up on the roof and act with compassion, justice, and inclusion in the world.

Charles Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton provide an excellent overview of how we have come to understand the process of creating meaning out of our experience.<sup>15</sup> Since Kant, we have realized that we don't perceive "things in themselves;"<sup>16</sup> rather, we perceive them as they are mediated by the images and structures that are already in our minds.<sup>17</sup> That is why people may experience the same thing (e.g., serving lunch to a person who is homeless) and not interpret their experiences in the same way. Indeed, their interpretation of an experience and the meaning they assign to it might be entirely different. One person might say,

*I spent two hours today in a hot kitchen, serving lasagna to a bunch of people who are homeless. I don't see the good it does. There are plenty of meals for them to have at other places, and there will always be homeless people. It is not like we are really helping people.*

Another person, serving the very same lunch, might say,

*I spent two hours today looking into the eyes of people who are not very different from me; I realized that while our circumstances are different, we have many things in common.*

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Wm. B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007), 1-15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 9.

Still another might reflect,

*I saw hunger today. I saw good people who have lost jobs and have nowhere to live. I am glad to serve a meal, but I want to work to solve this problem so that everyone has a place to sleep at night.*

Kant makes the distinction between “reproductive” faculty and “productive” faculty.<sup>18</sup> Reproductive faculty allows the imagination to assign a name to something as it appears to us, such as a “bowl” or a “table.” Productive faculty bundles our perceptions into larger and greater perceptions, utilizing the reproductive faculty over and over again.<sup>19</sup> For example, just after receiving the sacrament of communion, a person who serves lunch to someone who is homeless and hungry, may “bundle” at least two of the images she has experienced together. The equation might look something like this:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{bread} = \text{body of Christ} \\ + \\ \text{hunger's need is met by bread} \\ = \\ \text{hunger is met by the body of Christ} \end{array}$$

This is a very simplistic illustration because, in reality, an individual’s productive definitions are not this clear. A person might associate bread with the body of Christ, but he might also associate it with the toast he makes for breakfast or the smell of pie crust as he walks past a bakery. This same person might realize that hunger is alleviated by bread, but also understands that hunger is alleviated by his Mom’s lasagna, take-out

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

pizza, or welfare programs. So, in order for this new understanding to be possible, much “unbundling” and “rebundling” must occur.

This image of communion, as represented not by bread (as bread) but as the body of Christ alleviating hunger, may be entirely new for the person who is experiencing it, but it becomes possible when her imagination has been ignited from bundling these images in her mind together. This is why the imagination is essential for being able to translate our experience into meaning.

To better explain how the congregation moves through the house and up on the roof with a common vision and a common sense of purpose, the following sections explain more specifically Jennings’ notions of experience, imagination, and reflection, as well as my addition of action, which I now call, “*The Largest Table Effect*.”<sup>20</sup>

### Experience

For Jennings’ purpose, experience involves participation.<sup>21</sup> For example, a person would not be experiencing *The Largest Table* if he or she came and did not speak, listen, serve, or eat. This person would only be a passive observer. That said, we must also acknowledge that there are many doors by which to enter into experience. Not everyone’s experience is the same. We have the guests of *The Largest Table*, the volunteers at *The Largest Table*, the people who have been to *The Largest Table* only on occasion, and those who hear about it but who have never been. In addition to this, each

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<sup>20</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>21</sup> Jennings, 18.

of the individuals in each of these groups brings with them their own unique assumptions or experiences.

For each of these people, the meaning they assign to *The Largest Table* has become (according to Kant) a “production,” that is, a bundling of their previous “reproductions.” This means that while everyone may call what happens on Wednesdays at St. John’s, *The Largest Table*, there may be several different understandings of what this means. For some, it may be charity. For others, it may be a free meal. For others, it may be a place where they belong. The options for possible “productions” are endless. However, in relation to this model, regardless of how they would describe their personal experiences of *The Largest Table*, they have all entered the basement of Jennings’ house. The challenge for me, as their preacher, is to help the community create a “production” for *The Largest Table* that centers on compassion, justice, and inclusion.

Each of these people, regardless of their experience or lack of it, needs the imagination in order to be able to make meaning out of their experience. Paul Tillich, in his famous sermon, *The Depth of Experience*, illustrates how a person may “know something” or have a visceral experience, but not be able to reflect on it or assign meaning to it.

*Look at the student who knows the content of the hundred most important books of world history, and yet whose spiritual life remains as shallow as it ever was, or perhaps becomes even more superficial. And then look at an uneducated worker who performs a mechanical task day by day, but who suddenly asks ... “What does it **mean**, that I do this work? What does it mean for my life? What **is** the meaning of my life? Because he asks these questions, that man is on the way into depth, whereas the other, the student of history, dwells on the surface among petrified bodies, brought out of the depth by some spiritual earthquake of the past. The simple worker may grasp truth, even though he is unable to answer the*

*questions; the learned scholar may possess no truth, even though he knows all the truths of the past.*<sup>22</sup>

Despite the fact that she could not articulate why, my four-year old daughter experienced the meaning of communion well before her seminary-educated mother. In 1993, my family had the privilege of worshipping for a year at Trinity-St. Paul's United Church of Canada in the heart of downtown Toronto. At the time that I was in Toronto, my daughter was four and my son was approaching the age of two. There was a nursery for Drew, but my daughter, Courtney, joined me for the first part of worship every Sunday. The first Sunday that I realized this was to be the format, I cringed at the thought of trying to get her to "behave" each week. Within moments, I realized this would not be a concern. This service was designed as much for Courtney as it had been designed for me.<sup>23</sup> On the Sundays when the congregation celebrated the sacraments, the children were brought back into the congregation, because their presence as members of the church family was important. Courtney loved the Sundays when we had communion, and she would approach the altar with delight and anticipation. At the age of four, she was able to use productive reality to sense that which she was experiencing was more than bread and juice. Perhaps this was because she already had other welcoming and loving experiences to relate it to (big family dinners or parties in which strangers had quickly become friends.) Perhaps this was because she didn't have baggage, or other

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<sup>22</sup>Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner's, 1948), 55.

<sup>23</sup>For further exploration of the topic of children in worship see: Kathryn Nystrand Klamar, *Children in the Worshipping Community*, unpublished paper, October, 1995.

realities that she had already experienced, hindering her from seeing it as the joyful feast it was.

I watched my four-year-old, who did not understand what was happening from an intellectual level as she received the bread and cup. She was unable to understand much about the sacrament from a cognitive level, yet she fully received the elements and took them into her being, as she experienced “Take, eat, this is for *you*” as a beautiful act of love. I could see that my four-year-old took as much, if not more, joy and assurance from this sacrament as I did and was leading me to understand and experience it in new ways. I could see from her eagerness and delight that she was experiencing communion as inclusion, love embodied, and celebration.

In the very beginning of *The Largest Table* at St. John’s, at one of the first Wednesday noon worship services, a man named Anthony sat in the front pew. He spoke loudly, his fingernails were dirty, and he couldn’t stop looking at everything around him. He was in awe of the stained glass windows, the high ceilings, and the fact that there was a *female* “priest” (as he believed I was). I spoke with him briefly before the service and learned that he lived on the street and had only been in a church a couple of times in his life. He had never taken communion. We began worship by singing a hymn, and I noticed that while he could find the page on which the hymn was printed, he had difficulty reading the words. I shared my message for the day and prayed. Then I went to the communion table and said, “This may look like a small table, but it is the largest table in the world, open to anyone who seeks to know the living Christ.” After saying the

words of institution and blessing the elements I said, “The gifts of God for the people of God. Come, for all things are ready!”

Typically when I say these words during our Sunday morning worship service, there is a long pause; and then after everyone has looked around (as if they want to be sure they aren’t jumping in front of anyone in line), someone will cautiously and reverently approach the altar. Not on this day. As soon as I said, “Come, for ...” Anthony literally leapt over the first pew so that he could be the first in line! The anticipation, eagerness, and delight in his eyes reminded me of my own daughter when she was four-years-old receiving communion for the first time. Without question, this was a gift that was being received as an act of love. Without question, this person who had not spent much time in a church felt accepted and included. I don’t know what specifically ignited Anthony’s imagination so that he found meaning in his experience, but it was clear that he had.

The experiences I could share of people who have come to *The Largest Table* and received communion for the first time, or expressed that they have felt accepted like at no other time in their life, or who have tears in their eyes that speak more than words could ever say, are countless. There are others, of course, who attend regularly but don’t seem to assign the same meaning to their experience.

My early camp experience and the Toronto experience helped my view of communion evolve from being a symbolic ritual that was difficult to grasp intellectually to an experience of the body of Christ in the community of faith. I believe I was able to enter these experiences fully because my imagination had been ignited. My experiences

on Wednesdays at *The Largest Table* regularly deepen my own reflection on the meaning of communion, and what it means to be a community of faith. My experience has deepened, as week after week we move from the communion table to the lunch table where we again break bread together and share pieces of our day and the stories of our lives. Far more than a group of diverse people sitting side by side tolerating one another, we have become a community of faith that focuses more on what we have in common than on our differences. Gradually, guests from *The Largest Table* have become involved as volunteers with the lunch, some have begun to worship with us on Sundays, and others have become members of the church and become involved in the full life of the congregation. As one member of our congregation said, *“I don’t sit next to a “homeless person” in worship; I sit next to “Paul.” I know Paul, and when something happens to Paul it really affects me.”*<sup>24</sup>

Experience matters. Jesus’ first disciples had experiences with him that they transformed into symbolic images, rituals, and words. Their personal experiences and their reflection on those experiences, as well as the symbols and rituals they established, enabled Peter, James and Thomas to enact their mission adventures and also to engage in the storytelling that created for us the various gospel accounts. Then, of course, there are the disciples’ disciples, the people of the early church, who did not have firsthand experience of Jesus, but who heard about it from those who did. Christianity is alive today because from generation to generation we have found ways to share the experience of Jesus through igniting our imaginations.

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<sup>24</sup> Statement made by a member of the congregation during the 2008 focus groups.

Likewise, the experience we have on Wednesdays at *The Largest Table* lives on for those who are present on Wednesdays. It is an experience that can be reflected upon and further acted on by those who are present, but only to the extent that they are able to express their experience through words, symbols, and ritual. But how can people who have never been to *The Largest Table* benefit from the experience? Jennings suggests that they can, if their imagination is ignited by new images, language, and symbols that capture the essence of compassion, justice, and inclusion.

### Imagination

For Jennings, imagination is “*the initial way in which existence and reality come to expression in such a way as to be available to human awareness and to serve as the legitimate ground of reflection. ... The function of imagination then is the representation of the patterns of participation in and transcendence of the world in such a way as to make possible the experiencing of, and conscious participation in, reality.*”<sup>25</sup> In other words, for a person to engage in imagination, he or she draws upon all of his or her past reproductive and productive faculties to create meaning. For a person to engage in imagination, he or she has to draw upon things that he or she is familiar with to create new images and ideas.

When we first began to plan *The Largest Table* and anticipated what the worship service and luncheon would look like, it was evident that there was much fear amongst many of our volunteers who had either had negative experiences with people who lived on the street or who only had impressions formed from things they had been told or

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<sup>25</sup> Jennings, 17-18.

images they had seen in the media. Because most of the volunteers had no real experience to draw from, their imagination at that point typically consisted of negative images.

For example, prior to beginning *The Largest Table*, some of our volunteers would equate “homelessness” with laziness, “African-American” with dangerous, or “poor” with unskilled. In addition, it was clear that the common meaning of communion held by most volunteers, i.e., their “reproduction” of communion, was deeply personal and related mostly to personal forgiveness from God. As we have participated in *The Largest Table* and our experiences have deepened, our reproductions have been challenged. We have met earnest, hard-working people who are not only skilled, but have a great desire to share their gifts. These experiences, which challenge our former reproductions, invite us to engage the imagination for a new productive reality.

One volunteer wrote to me about this a couple of years after her first involvement with *The Largest Table*. She admitted being fearful when she began, but through her experiences she has been able to construct new images both of our church and of the people she meets:

*A favorite motto I like to say is that the downtown location of St. John's used to be a liability, but now it is an asset because of The Largest Table. Indeed, the word “blessing” could also be used here. It's the word of choice, used repeatedly by one homeless fellow on his first visit. He just raved about the beauty of our church and the blessing that we are to the city because of The Largest Table!*

*This fact is in evidence every week. When they come the first time, many folks just can't believe it ... the food, warmth, loving atmosphere. They keep coming back, bringing friends, to this safe haven at St. John's. I overheard one guest tell a newcomer, “Oh, man, you're gonna love it ... it's such a good church!” Such a simple statement, but it sure says a lot.*

*...In the past 4 years, the feeling of “family” has grown. We try to use the first names of folks when we do know them. Whenever we know the date of someone’s birthday (and we’re not swamped!) we get the whole room involved in singing “Happy Birthday.” Chatting and joking with folks, we believe, is another way to enjoy one another’s “humanness.”*

*And how has the LTE permeated the whole congregation? I think it has made everyone more open, tolerant, and brave! Many years ago we would’ve been afraid to open our doors like this. But we certainly have learned a lot from this experience ... and been blessed greatly!<sup>26</sup>*

Jennings acknowledges Ernst Cassier, the author of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, as having contributed much to our understanding of how the imagination works, and how the capacity for finding meaning in experience is unique to humanity. Jennings quotes Cassier:

*Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality.<sup>27</sup>*

Jennings outlines four functions of the human imagination: recognition, orientation, communication, and transformation.<sup>28</sup> The scope of this paper does not have space for an analysis of the first three; for the purpose of this thesis, we are most concerned with the function of transformation. Ultimately, transformation is what can happen after the hearer has engaged her experience through imagination and then is able to reflect upon it.

Jennings, writing specifically about religious communities, states that if a community is stable, this function of transformation happens smoothly as individuals are

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<sup>26</sup> Lee Reiner, field note presented to Kathy Dwyer February 2, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Jennings, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Jennings, 54.

incorporated into the community. However, in a less stable environment, this function of transformation isn't subtle at all; it changes everything. Jennings writes, "*When Jesus is reported to have commanded the leaving of family and work we have an example of how totally the alteration of mythos<sup>29</sup> entails the alteration of relationship to all dimensions of one's experience.*"<sup>30</sup>

Jennings suggests that there are five modes of religious imagination: vision, symbol, myth, ritual, and apocalyptic.<sup>31</sup> He draws upon Paul Tillich's work to describe the six characteristics of religious symbol:

1. They point beyond themselves
2. They participate in that to which they point
3. They open up dimensions of reality external to ourselves which are otherwise inaccessible
4. They open up commensurate dimensions of our internal reality equally inaccessible
5. They cannot be intentionally produced
6. They grow and die corresponding to their ability or inability to give expression to and mediate to a human community the reality to which they point<sup>32</sup>

All of these, especially the sixth characteristic, provide an invitation for the preacher to fan the flames of imagination with regard to the sacrament of communion. Given that each of us comes to the experience of the sacrament in a different way, how might the preacher preach about communion so that the symbols mediate a deeper reality for those who worship?

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<sup>29</sup> Jennings, 2. For Jennings, the term *mythos* designates "*that set of symbols, rituals, and assertions, which, taken together, announce and mediate the presence of the sacred so as to represent, orient, communicate, and transform existence in the world for a community of persons. The term mythos thus designates a certain unity or structure in the religious expressions of the people.*"

<sup>30</sup> Jennings, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Jennings, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Jennings, 26.

Ronald Byars, in the *Future of Protestant Worship: Beyond the Worship Wars*, writes about this problem, citing one obstacle as a decay in language and symbolism: *Just as baptism has become smaller and smaller, the Eucharist has also become smaller and smaller among us.*<sup>33</sup> Byars cites Jean-Jacques Allmen, a twentieth century Swiss theologian, who said that Liberal Protestantism “has never known quite what to do about the sacraments and...is challenged more strongly by the sacraments than by anything else.” Perhaps this is because we have not kept the language and symbol alive in the imagination of the hearers or, as Hellwig suggests, it is because we have never understood the very foundation of the sacrament.

For our purposes here, let us assume that preachers have an experience of the sacrament that is meaningful for them. Furthermore, the meaning they have is a meaning that they would like to translate to their congregation. To ignite the imagination of the hearers, we must give new life to the language of faith and its symbols.

Paul Scott Wilson, author and professor of homiletics at Emmanuel College, Toronto, suggests doing this by going back to the origin of words and also by reaching outside the language of faith and pulling in other words and experiences to juxtapose with them already existing terms and ideas. He defines imagination as “the bringing together of two ideas that might not otherwise be connected and developing the creative energy they generate.”<sup>34</sup> Wilson systematically describes how this is essential to preaching and suggests how, as preachers, we always need to be juxtaposing the Biblical text and our

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<sup>33</sup> Ronald Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship: Beyond the Worship Wars* (Westminster: Louisville, 2002) 68.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1988) 32.

situation, the law found in scripture with the grace found in scripture, story and doctrine, and our personal roles of pastor and prophet. Wilson challenges the preacher to use imagination to keep the gospel and the words of the faith alive:

*The decay of language is important for preachers to understand, particularly those who are learning to use the imagination. Quite simply, many of the words we commonly use to talk about the faith have lost their spark. Repeated use of them without exposing them to imagination will have no more positive effect on the congregation than will raising the voice in giving directions to someone who does not speak our language.<sup>35</sup>*

How does the word, “bread” become sacramental? Wilson suggests that in order to ignite the imagination that would allow us to think about and experience this term differently, we must lay them alongside other new, but common, experiences.<sup>36</sup>

Take for example the term “bread” as it relates to communion. The term bread originally meant a “morsel” or a “piece,” as in the sense of “a piece of bread,” and over time the term has come to mean “a means of substance.”<sup>37</sup> Sharing bread with the hungry, sharing bread with our enemies, bread that is overflowing and endless, bread that comes from all parts of the world, yeast that rises, dough that is kneaded by loving hands, old hands, or suffering hands are all images that might help the hearer’s imagination create a bridge for a new understanding of how bread relates to communion.

Aware that many of our members have never attended *The Largest Table*, I have been sensitive to the challenge of helping them enter the experience and claim it as their own, even from a distance. Since its inception, I have preached with frequency about

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<sup>35</sup> Wilson, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, 40-45.

<sup>37</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993 ed.

specific experiences from *The Largest Table*. I have been intentional about lifting up for the congregation the gospel as I see it unfolding amongst us on Wednesdays. Gradually, I hear members of the congregation who may never have attended on Wednesdays speak about *The Largest Table* as “theirs.” Our congregation and the community around us have increasingly identified our congregation with this specific ministry. Together, and individually, we have been working on creating a “production” of what *The Largest Table* means for us.

### Reflection

According to Jennings, reflection is the process of moving between two different perceptions in the mind. So, for there to be reflection, there must be alternate ways of interpreting reality.<sup>38</sup> Jennings cites Jesus and the Pharisees to illustrate the tension that reflection often provokes. At some level, the conflict we witness in scripture between Jesus and the Pharisees is about the conflict within Judaism on the role of faith.<sup>39</sup> This is why there are many groups, such as fundamentalists, who do not welcome critical theological reflection and who resist any scientific discovery as it threatens the basic elements of their convictions.<sup>40</sup>

A willingness to engage in critical theological reflection indicates a willingness to grow and to change. It can happen individually, and it also can happen communally. When the process is slow and gradual, and when it is introduced with new experiences,

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<sup>38</sup> Jennings, 93.

<sup>39</sup> Jennings, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

images, and ideas, the congregation can reflect (theologically) on its beliefs and behaviors. As Jennings explains,

*It is crucial to theological reflection that personal meaning be related to communal meaning. The theologian is not the author of the mythos upon which she or he reflects. The mythos is received from the past and from a community. Nor is that all, for the function of the mythos ... is to serve as the basis for the communication or sharing of meaning, and this functions to create and sustain community. The mythos functions in this way only insofar as the interpretation of its meaning does, in fact, foster communication, and thus engender afresh the community sustained by the mythos. Theological reflection grounded in the mythos then will have as its aim, directly or indirectly, the reformation and renewal of the community which is sustained by the mythos.<sup>41</sup>*

Perhaps one of the ways I have seen this work most powerfully in our congregation has been with regard to homosexuality and whether or not our congregation should be “open and affirming.” When I came to St. John’s nearly eight years ago this idea would have been quickly rejected. However, the issue first came up eighteen months after we had begun *The Largest Table*. There was certainly conflict; indeed, this initial period was tumultuous with some loud voices leaving the congregation, while many new people joined the congregation or became involved for the first time.

In the midst of the turmoil, I found members of the congregation, especially those who were involved with *The Largest Table*, willing to reflect on this new paradigm in light of their recent experiences. Part of their recent experiences included welcoming and getting to know gay, lesbian, and transgendered people who had begun to participate in the life of the congregation. However, I suspect a factor that was equally as powerful

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<sup>41</sup> Jennings, 144.

was their relationship with the poor and homeless, a different kind of “other” of whom they had initially been fearful.

When the mythos changes, the entire story by which a community defines and locates itself also changes. When we actually voted on becoming an opening and affirming congregation in the fall of 2007, the vote was unanimous and needed very little discussion. The theological reflection and paradigm shift had already happened; we had lived into a new reality. We had left the house of experience, imagination, and reflection, and climbed onto the roof where we began to act with compassion, justice, and inclusion. This is what I now call “*The Largest Table Effect*.”

### *The Largest Table Effect*

While Jennings does not include action in his model of experience, imagination, and reflection, he does acknowledge its importance. He states that an aim of theological reflection is to “facilitate the transformation of the physical and social reality.” He goes on to explain that “theology is not simply involved in the juggling or clarification of ideas; it drives toward practical implication. It is concerned not simply with a way of knowing, but with a way of being, caring, and doing.”<sup>42</sup>

One of my congregants<sup>43</sup> termed this “way of being, caring and doing” as “*The Largest Table Effect*.” She defines this effect as “... *having a spirit permeate all members and actions [so that] all events and tasks automatically, without thinking, carry with them compassion, justice, and welcome* (I have modified this and used the word

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<sup>42</sup> Jennings, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Karen Corcoran, written correspondence, 2008.

“inclusion” instead). *To become The Largest Table means working to break down barriers—of ignorance, of fear, of distrust, of apathy. The same things Jesus faced!*” In order to move the entire congregation from my experience along the path toward *The Largest Table Effect*, my preaching had to ignite their imagination and lead them into a reflective experience that allowed them to "produce" for themselves that experience.

### **The Role of Preaching in Igniting the Imagination**

In 1971, Fred Craddock published the seminal work, *As One Without Authority*. This book changed homiletical scholarship through the formal introduction of inductive preaching. Many scholars point to Craddock as the one who helped the practice of preaching shift from a deductive method (stating the main point of the sermon and then supporting this with sub-points) to an inductive one (sharing particular insights and leading the hearer to the main point). With this shift in preaching, the role of the imagination was heightened, because the hearer was no longer asked to simply listen to reason; he or she was asked to enter an experience and draw his or her own conclusions about scripture and its meaning.

The inductive method of preaching requires much imagination on the part of both the preacher and the listener. As Craddock noted, imagination is often referred to pejoratively, as “just imagination”;<sup>44</sup> however, the practice of pulling someone into an experience and helping them form new images, as well as bundling their reproductive reality to produce new images, is a slow and arduous process. As Craddock writes,

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<sup>44</sup> Fred B Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 63.

*Long after a person's head has consented to the preacher's idea, the old images may still hang in the heart. But not until that image is replaced is the person really changed; until then the person is torn, doing battle with the self and possibly making casualties of those nearby in the process. This change takes time, because the longest trip a person takes is that from head to heart.*<sup>45</sup>

Craddock describes the effective preacher as having an “empathetic imagination.”

By this Craddock means that

1. the preacher is able to access the concrete experiences he or she has had with individuals in the congregation who give particular voice to the concerns expressed in the text: (i.e., the woman who can't meet her mortgage or the volunteer who is afraid to answer the church's door in fear of meeting a stranger or someone who asks of her more than she can give), and
2. the preacher embraces aesthetics; he or she perceives situations, things, and people beyond their specific utilitarian value. To view the world from an aesthetic perspective is to see its parts not as a strict dichotomy such as right and wrong, but more subtly and nuanced, using instead such descriptors as “beautiful” and “ugly.”<sup>46</sup>

Since the publication of *As One Without Authority*, much, if not most, of homiletical scholarship has been in response to Craddock's work. Many scholars have built on this shift with specific suggestions regarding the form of the sermon. Eugene Lowry introduced the “narrative sermon,” which sets up the sermon as a plot with this specific outline: plot, conflict, complication, sudden shift, unfolding.<sup>47</sup> Henry Mitchell built on this form, as did Frank Thomas, with a slight variation: situation, complication, resolution, celebration. Each of these forms builds the sermon inductively, utilizing the imagination to bring the hearer into the experience.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 54-85.

While each of these forms is helpful, a preacher would not want to use the same form week in and week out. Craddock acknowledges this in *As One Without Authority*, and Thomas Long expands on the importance of utilizing a variety of forms in his book, *The Witness of Preaching*.<sup>48</sup> More recently, Long has built on the value of narrative, inductive preaching with discussion of a further shift in our fast-paced, media driven culture that challenges attention spans. Long is moving toward “episodic preaching.” Of episodic preaching, Long writes,

*Because we are proclaimers of God's story, we will always be storytellers. But now, in order to tell this story, we must also stand back from it and become teachers and sages and ethical guides. No single homiletical formula will do; no one way of structuring sermons, however compelling, will accomplish the task; no solitary rhetorical strategy will open all the doors of the faithful imaginations of our hearers. We must help people in a fragmented and episodic culture to repair their ability not only to hear the gospel story but also to know what a powerful story is in the first place, how it works, and what possibilities it affords for identity and ethical living. We must use every gift of language, every responsible strategy of communication, to help people see, in practical and concrete ways, the shape of life that results when one builds a nest in the wide and embracing branches of the gospel story.”<sup>49</sup>*

With episodic preaching, the preacher works not only to pull a common thread through the entire sermon, with each point building on the one made before, the preacher also creates a sermon that the listener can tune in and out of. Long likens the episodic sermon to a person strolling through a park and sitting down on a park bench; even if the listener is only seated for a portion of the sermon he or she should get something out of it.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas G Long, "Out of the Loop: the Changing Practice of Preaching," *The Craft of Preaching*, entry posted August 6, 2008, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/theologypreaching.aspx?article\\_id=112](http://www.workingpreacher.org/theologypreaching.aspx?article_id=112) (accessed December 29, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Thomas G Long, "Preaching the Parables" (class lecture, ACTS D. Min. Program, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, June 2008).

## Preaching Strategies to Ignite the Imagination

Throughout my doctoral program, I have experimented with several different forms of preaching. I believe that each form has helped me become a more effective preacher and has assisted me in bringing the congregation into my experience and the experiences that have been shared with me of *The Largest Table*. More than using a variety of forms, however, I have worked to develop a variety of strategies and techniques that now fill my homiletical toolbox, and that I can engage to ignite the imagination both of the preacher and the hearer. I briefly outline ten of these tools here:

1. ***Incarnational Translation***: an interpretative process for engaging the biblical text in contemporary terms and producing an illustration that mirrors the form and content of scripture.<sup>51</sup> The following is an incarnational translation I wrote based on the Magnificat found in Luke 1:39-56:

*And Paul said,*

*There is a song in my heart and I can't keep from sharing it.*

*For I have been blessed by the best. God has blessed me. Me, the one who has been thrown out on the street and unable to find work. God has blessed me. Me, who nobody ever thought much of anything about.*

*Surely, from now on others will see it, too. I have been blessed by the best. There is a song in my heart and I can't keep from sharing it.*

*For I was sleeping on the street, and I was let into the shelter.*

*I had nothing to wear and this nice man gave me a shirt.*

*I was searching the trash for something to eat and was told where to get a good meal.*

*I was in a new town knowin' no one and someone listened to my song and invited me into this place, this wonderful place.*

*God is great and has done amazing things for me.*

*I have been blessed by the best. There is a song in my heart and I can't keep from sharing it.*

*God does great things for those who sing God's praises, for those who trust in God. God gives to those who think about God and who love God.*

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<sup>51</sup> For a complete review see Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

*All these guys who think more about their stocks than their salvation, they don't get it.*

*For God fills the hungry with good things and the rich somehow seem empty.  
God has helped God's people, those who remember God and who give thanks every day.*

*God keeps God's promises, the promises God has made to all people of all time.  
And Paul continued to sing the songs on his heart and he stayed with these nice people for awhile before moving on.*

See also sermons three and five in appendix B for examples of *incarnational translation*.

- 2. *Tap into core beliefs:*** At the heart of Frank Thomas' Celebrative Design is the need to be able to have such a significant encounter with the text that it touches a core belief. When we are preaching about something that we feel so very strongly about, we are more apt to move the hearer.<sup>52</sup> Craddock cites a potential obstacle for preachers, their discomfort with their own emotion. In bringing the hearer into the imaginative process, it is important to be able to feel our way along this new path.<sup>53</sup>
- 3. *"Show" don't "tell":*** If my advisor, Dr. Paris Donehoo, said it once he said it a dozen times: "Show me, don't tell me."

See sermons one, four, and five in appendix B for examples of *"Show" don't "tell."*

- 4. *Let's call him "Harry":*** It is easier to imagine a person when he or she has a name. Even when the story is a real story for which I want to protect the identity of the character, Dr. Donehoo has helped me see that I can simply say, "Let's call him Harry;" this makes it clear that this is not the person's actual name but it allows the hearers to put a name with the face I am verbally painting for them.

See sermons one, two, and four for examples of *Let's call him "Harry."*

- 5. *Don't "interrupt" the narrative:*** Craddock warns of interrupting the narrative with phrases like, "we find" or "we see."<sup>54</sup> Dr. Donehoo has helped me take this a step further by not giving any "cues" in conversations (i.e., "she leaned in" or "he then said") Instead, I have worked to just assume the characters in conversations that are shared in my sermons and provide visual and vocal cues when the voices are changing.

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<sup>52</sup> See Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Craddock, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Craddock, 76.

See sermons three and four of appendix B for examples of *Don't interrupt the narrative*.

6. ***Tone, cadence, and pitch:*** From the beginning of this program, a personal goal of mine has been to increase the range of my voice in terms of tone, cadence, and pitch. It was clear from the beginning that this was a goal Dr. Donehoo had for me, as well. Easier said than done, I have spent much time practicing delivery, especially in relation to the Biblical text. The tone, cadence, and pitch of the sermon not only work to bring people into the story and convey the emotion of the message, they are a form of interpretation themselves. Members of the congregation have shared with me that they now listen as I read the scripture and can usually find a clue to the emphasis and meaning of the sermon because of the way I share the scripture.
7. ***Speak from your toes:*** In the second year of this program, I enlisted a vocal coach<sup>55</sup> to help me with my delivery. Together, we worked on tone, cadence and pitch. We worked on different ways I might use my voice to interpret the message. All of this was useful, but one comment was especially helpful, “Speak from your toes.” I had been told to “speak from my gut” before, but never my toes! To do this, firmly plant your feet in a steady position. Before speaking, feel your connection to the ground. Breathe deeply, and allow your voice to travel from the deepest part of you. When I began doing this, I noticed that my voice was lower and had a fuller range. I also believe this physical planting helps me more fully convey the conviction I feel.
8. ***Use your whole body:*** As with many preachers, I typically preach from a large pulpit that covers much of my body. It is easy to feel caged in by the pulpit and I have some times left the pulpit to have more freedom for movement. However, Dr. Donehoo has encouraged me to use my whole body even when, perhaps especially when, behind a big pulpit. For example, open your arms when talking about receiving a gift. Turn your body from side to side as you enact a conversation. Use your arms to draw a room and then look and move in accordance with the space you have created while telling a story. Take a step back to express fear or lean in and over the pulpit to express keen interest or close listening. All of these movements are subtle means for bringing the listener more fully into the story you are creating.
9. ***Allow yourself to embellish stories:*** Ever desiring to speak the truth and honor the stories I tell by conveying them accurately, I have been hesitant to embellish stories in order to make a point. An example of my reluctance occurred when I shared a story in a sermon based on Luke 14. I read a story in a book calling

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<sup>55</sup> Cindi Vaughn (vocal coaching session, Vaughn Music Studios, Columbus, Ohio, Fall 2007).

*Leading from the Table* by Paul Galbreath<sup>56</sup> which I shared with the congregation, essentially as the story was written.

*(Galbreath).. wrote about a couple he knew who were active in church and going through a divorce. They both continued to come to church, but to avoid one another they came and left through different doors and they sat in different parts of the sanctuary. One Sunday, they were caught off guard. The pastor did communion a little differently that day and invited the congregation to get up and stand in a circle on the perimeter of the sanctuary. There was quite a bit of shuffling around and this couple, who had been so intent on avoiding one another, ended up standing side by side. The bread and the cup were passed and each member of the congregation served the person beside them. When the bread and the cup came to this couple, they served one another. With tears streaming down their faces, they served one another. “This is the body of Christ broken for you.” “This is God’s love poured out for you.” Their problems weren’t solved, but around the table their bond in Christ was stronger than their differences.*

Because this story wasn’t even my own, I was especially reluctant to embellish it. Dr. Donehoo challenged me on this and showed me that I can embellish stories without being dishonest or untrue. Consider how the following version would be received differently:

*Paul Galbreath, a Presbyterian minister, writes about a couple he knew who were active in the church and going through a divorce. Today let’s call them Yvonne and Darrell. We don’t know Yvonne and Darrell, but I imagine them to be like many of you who have been married for decades and have made church an important part of your life. Yvonne and Darrell were at church every Sunday and they were both involved with many aspects of the church life. As their marriage began to have difficulty, they both wanted and needed to come to church. And so they would both come. Without ever discussing it, they developed a pattern that kept them from having to really see or speak with one another. Yvonne would come a little early. She came through the east door and sat near the front on the east side of the sanctuary. Darrell would come right as the service was beginning. He would walk through the front door, sit on the west side and then as the final hymn was played, Darrell would quietly exit the west door...*

In addition to embellishing stories we read or hear, we can also embellish our lived experience by not only stating what obviously has happened, but what we as the preachers *perceive* happening in that moment.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Galbreath, *Leading From the Table* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008).

See sermons two and four in Appendix B for an example of *Embellishment*.

10. ***Don't tie things up too neatly:*** Inherent in the narrative or inductive form is a respect for the listeners' intelligence and participation with the sermon. If the preacher states the meaning of the sermon or her point too specifically, there is no room for the listener to create her own meaning. Space for the listener to reach his or her own conclusions and do his or her own work in bundling reproductive images to create new ones is critical. Because each person brings a different set of images to the sermonic experience, each person might need to create a different type of bundle to reach similar conclusions.

See sermon three in Appendix B for an example of *Don't tie things up too neatly*.

## **Methods**

My goal over the past two years has been to take all of the tools that have been accumulating in my homiletical toolbox and use them to ignite the imagination of our congregation so that our understanding of the sacrament of communion might be broadened and deepened to include justice, compassion, and inclusion. Of course, my desire was not simply to create significant theological meaning for communion, but to create experiences through the imagination that would cause listeners to reflect and act on what they had heard. With the help of the PPG, I developed a learning plan that included the following measures:

- a pre-survey and post-survey of the congregation about communion,
- an invitation to the congregation to take “field notes,” identifying any time or circumstance when they sensed that the people and experience at St. John’s could be described as having the spirit of *The Largest Table* or “*The Largest Table Effect*,” and

- focus groups that members of the PPG would lead to further probe the congregations' understanding and experience of communion. These focus groups were held in the spring and fall of 2008.

### **Pre-survey Results**

While surveys certainly have their limits, they can provide useful information. The pre-survey (appendix A), had 39 respondents. A majority of respondents (24) indicated that they always looked forward to receiving communion, and even more (28) found communion to be both "about their personal relationship with God" and "about being a part of a community of faith." Words that respondents most frequently associated with the feeling of communion included "meditative," "humble," "forgiven," and "loved." The responses to the open-ended questions were more revealing. Of the 28 people who chose to finish the statement, "I understand the sacrament of communion to mean ...," twenty-four reflected an understanding that had to do with a personal relationship with God or Jesus, often mentioning God's love and forgiveness. Only four respondents mentioned the communal nature of the sacrament.

In the brochure on communion that the UCC has published, five possible meanings for communion are listed:

*"In the sacrament of Holy Communion, also called the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, meaning "thanksgiving," Christians hear, taste, touch and receive the grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ in a unique way. Communion is:*

1. *a joyous act of thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will do for the redeeming of creation;*

2. *a sacred memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, a living and effective sign of Christ's sacrifice in which Christ is truly and rightly present to those who eat and drink;*
3. *an earnest prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit to unite those who partake with the Risen Christ and with each other, and to restore creation, making all things new;*
4. *an intimate experience of fellowship in which the whole church in every time and place is present and divisions are overcome;*
5. *a hopeful sign of the promised Realm of God marked by justice, love and peace”<sup>57</sup>*

Of these five meanings, members of the congregation identified primarily two during the pre-survey:

1. *a joyous act of thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will do for the redeeming of creation;*
2. *a sacred memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, a living and effective sign of Christ's sacrifice in which Christ is truly and rightly present to those who eat and drink.*

These responses confirmed for me that many members of the congregation have a limited view of the sacrament and that there was plenty of room for us to broaden our understanding and experience together.

### **Interventions**

The specific interventions over the two-year period included

- five sermons on communion that were each to be followed by a survey,
- six sermons on table-fellowship scenes found in the gospel of Luke, and
- a change in the style in which we took communion to help mirror the meaning

I was working to convey (started in year two).

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<sup>57</sup> Communion, Cleveland: United Church. Ucc.org, United Church of Christ. (accessed December 30, 2008).

## Five Sermons on the Sacrament of Communion

Over the course of two years I preached five sermons about communion; each one had a different message and was designed to help the hearer experience a different aspect of the sacrament. As Craig Satterlee and Lester Ruth note in their book, *Creative Preaching on the Sacraments*, many parishioners have spent their whole lives going to church without knowing exactly what the sacraments mean. Of course, at some intuitive level, they know what the sacraments mean to them, but they have never had anyone help them articulate it.<sup>58</sup> To preach on the sacrament of communion means to give words to God's action through the meal and to "lead the listeners into the mysteries of the Christian faith."<sup>59</sup> While there are obvious passages to be used for preaching on the sacraments, there are less obvious ones that invite the preacher and the listener into the rich imagery of scripture. It was my joy to work with some of these texts in new ways.

The following are the texts I used for each of the five communion sermons, the behavioral purpose statements I developed for each, and the strategies I employed to ignite the hearers' imagination.

**Sermon One:** John 6 (Feeding of the five thousand): *Given that people often experience the sacrament of communion as a private ritual, I want the listener to experience God's action in community so that communion becomes a means for experiencing connection to others and to God.*

Strategies: Show Don't Tell; Let's Call Him Harry

**Sermon Two:** Psalm 23: *Given that we are not at peace and we all experience enemies, I want the hearers to accept God's invitation to come to the table in the presence of their enemies so that they might move more closely toward the reconciliation with others for which God longs.*

Strategies: Repetition; Let's Call Him Harry; Embellish the story

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<sup>58</sup> Craig Satterlee and Lester Ruth, *Creative Preaching on the Sacraments*, (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 9.

**Sermon Three:** Matthew 2: 1-12 (Epiphany): *Given that all of us have a longing for something we cannot name, I want the hearers to experience that longing as God's pull into communion so that they are able to move forward with faith and hope.*

Strategies: Incarnational Translation; Don't Interrupt the Narrative; Don't Tie Things Up

**Sermon Four:** Micah 6:6-8 and Luke 14:7-14: *Given that many of us are reluctant to initiate relationships with those we perceive to be different from us, I want the hearer to be motivated to come to the table with all sorts of people so that the distinction of "us" and "them" fades away.*

Strategies: Show, Don't Tell; Let's Call Him Harry; Don't Interrupt the Narrative; Embellish

**Sermon Five:** Luke 15:11-32: *Given that we are often reckless with what God has given us or resistant to fully appreciating what is already ours, I want the hearers to experience what is really important to God so that they might feel real celebration.*

Strategies: Incarnational Translation; Show, Don't Tell

### **Six Sermons on the Table Fellowship Scenes Found in Luke**

While the scope of this paper does not leave space for an exploration of the topic of table fellowship, there has been much written on the particular emphasis of table fellowship in the gospel of Luke.<sup>60</sup> In the gospel of Luke there are numerous meal scenes in which Jesus:

1. is described at table with various kinds of people (Lk 5:27-39; 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:14-38; 24:13-35; and 24:36-43).
2. tells tales about table fellowship (5:34-35; 12:35-48; 13:23-30; 14:7-24; 15:11-32; 16:19-31, and 22:27).

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<sup>60</sup> See Robert J Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical, 2006); Jerome H Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, by Jerome H Neyrey, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), and Jerome H Neyrey, "Meals, Food and Table Fellowship in the New Testament," <http://www.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/meals/html> (accessed December 31, 2008).

Perusing these passages, the reader finds not one repeated meaning for this table fellowship, but many meanings, all contributing to rich images of what it is to break bread with Jesus and to sit at the table with him, and with others. In preparing to preach a sermon series on some of these texts, I went through each one and identified the characteristics of the table fellowship I saw in the text. I compared these to my impression of how our congregation generally viewed the sacrament of communion a few years ago and how I anticipate they will view it as they come to produce an understanding of *The Largest Table* (see Table 1). The following are the texts I used for each of the six table fellowship sermons and the behavioral purpose statements I developed for each:

**Sermon One:** Micah 6:6-8 and Luke 14:7-14: *Given that many of us are reluctant to initiate relationships with those we perceive to be different from us, I want the hearer to be motivated to come to the table with all sorts of people so that the distinction of “us” and “them” fades away.* (this was also considered one of the sermons on communion)

**Sermon Two:** Luke 5:27-33 *Given that many people have a view of church and religion similar to the Pharisees in this text, I want the hearer to experience God’s invitation to them into a relational, open, and life-giving spirituality.*

**Sermon Three:** Luke 10:38-42 *Given that we all get distracted and anxious about many things, and sometimes get confused about the central purpose of table fellowship (i.e., it’s about the “fellowship,” not the “table”), I want the hearer to recognize that they are constantly being invited to be both guest and host so that they will experience the fullness of hospitality.*

**Sermon Four:** Luke 10:1-11 *Given that we often are excited about what we have to give and are met with resistance, ambivalence or rejection, I want the hearer to experience God’s encouragement to not force relationships, so that we can realize there are times to let go or walk away.*

**Sermon Five:** Luke 15:11-32 *Given that we are often reckless with what God has given us or resistant to fully appreciate what is already ours, I want the hearers to experience*

*what is really important to God so that they might feel real celebration. (This was also considered one of the sermons on communion).*

**Sermon Six:** Luke 24:13-35 *Given that we often feel like giving up and walking away, I want to encourage the hearers to stick together and stay at the table so that they might experience God's revelation for us in community.*

#### Changes in the style in which we took communion:

Typically, we serve communion by intinction with the congregation coming forward to receive the elements. About twice a year, we serve communion in the pews with small cups of juice and small pieces of bread passed on trays through the pews. In the second year, there were several times we changed the style of the way communion was served. One time we invited people to serve one another in their pews with the chalice and loaf. Another time, when we served communion by intinction, we invited people to be served and then take the place of the person who was holding the bread or the cup and serve the people who followed. We also significantly shifted the music that accompanied the communion service, also to match the tone of the message I conveyed in the sermon. This was done in an attempt to physically mirror the meaning I was trying to convey with my words and to draw more attention to the actual ritual itself.

#### **Post-survey Results**

During the worship services at which each of the communion sermons were preached, a survey was inserted in the bulletin to invite feedback (Appendix B). One of the questions asked whether a particular sermon had caused the hearer to have any new thoughts or feelings on the sacrament of communion. Of the respondents, twenty-four

said “yes,” and one person said “no” in response to the first sermon. In response to the second sermon sixteen people indicated having a new thought or feeling about communion and only one person indicated he or she did not. For the third sermon, twenty-three people said “yes” and two said “no.” There was not a direct question asked about their thoughts and understandings of communion after surveys four and five.

Among some of the thoughts that listeners shared are the following:

In response to sermon one:

- *I've come to church all my life and have taken communion for 20. I have never been more moved by the words from the Pastor and the music and the people from all walks of life. When I took the bread I was overwhelmed with emotion of taking part in what Jesus gave us*
- *Communion is not just a connection with the Trinity, but with everyone. The people are a people; a community, a family.*
- *Expansive – individual and as part of a larger community at the same time*

In response to sermon two:

- *God is the host: I love this image – I never really got the “The Largest Table” image until now. Enemies: I love the idea that Mormons, Jews, Muslims, Christians, etc. are all welcome to, and make up God’s communion table in this house. I love the idea/image of God’s house holding all the places of worship in the world – where friends and enemies alike sit down to commune together. Each religion/sect seems to think they are the only ones who are invited. I’m delighted by the sermon’s message that reveals the opposite: everyone is invited. I love the inclusiveness of this vision. I love the humor, too, of all these groups showing up and being shocked at the presence of the others – like some big cosmic joke from God.*
- *I have new thoughts in that sharing communion isn’t just a forgiveness of sins, but a total experience of sharing God’s table.*
- *That “my enemies” are not just or necessarily those traditionally meant by the definition of the word – those we fight against in war – but that God’s intended meaning is much broader, including my older brother who despite our age we still bicker – like kids, and like my boss who I don’t respect, etc. These are the people that should be on my mind and in my prayers as I come to God’s table seeking forgiveness and wholeness for myself. I should recognize He is offering the same to them and I should do the same.*

In response to sermon three:

- *Requirement for faith is hunger - a willingness to be fed – communion – acknowledge hunger and allow ourselves to be fed – follow star to communion table where longing will be satisfied – place where God feeds the followers and satisfies longing in community*
- *Today’s sermon underscored the concept of “hunger” as a motivation for faith, and that has given me a new compassion for those whose faith is different from my own.*
- *Recognize and feed my hunger for God – allow myself to be fed. When I make a mistake, like Ava, I am forgiven.*

In response to sermon four:

- *Solution to worlds problems is simple – get to know your neighbor – reach out beyond comfort zone – what do we have in common? Communion unites and breaks down barriers*
- *How I might get outside my own comfortable bubble, my established circle of friends, and seek to be both accepting of and accepted by new friends that may challenge me in new ways.*
- *My selfishness – never has a sermon moved me to tears as today’s sermon did. I don’t want to forget the feelings I experienced today.*

In response to sermon five:

- *Material vs. “relationships” and celebrating those relationships – reckless celebration fueled by greed vs. resentful and resistant – celebration was about connection and relationship*
- *What really matters in life. It was interesting to reflect on the different perspectives that people have for celebrating – or not celebrating. I enjoyed listening to the prodigal son story. It did not sound like a Bible verse.*
- *The “big bin of laundry” reminded me of my “big list of to dos” I get overwhelmed, tired and bitter, unless I take time out to celebrate the love, joy and abundance in my life*

## Field Notes

Through two E-mail broadcasts, a column in our newsletter, a notice in several bulletins, and forms that were left for over six weeks in the pews, I invited the congregation to provide me with field notes about any time or circumstance when they sensed that the people and their experience at St. John's could be described as having the spirit of *The Largest Table* or "*The Largest Table Effect*." While I received numerous replies to my inquiry about this when I E-mailed many people from the congregation last summer, my response from the full congregation was disappointing. I received nine responses—three from volunteers of *The Largest Table*, and six from other members of the congregation. Among the responses I received from people who were not volunteers, were the comments, "I am glad this ministry is a part of St. John's" or "I feel guilty that I cannot come; I will bake cookies for it more often." These responses indicated to me that the question must have been too abstract. However, among the volunteers who responded, there was this reply, reprinted here, in part:

*... How about some thoughts from the trenches? .. A favorite motto I like to say is that the downtown location of St. John's used to be a liability .. now it is an asset because of The Largest Table. Indeed, the word "blessing" could also be used here. It's the word of choice, used repeatedly by one homeless fellow on his first visit. He just raved about the beauty of our church and the blessing that we are to the city because of The Largest Table!*

*This fact is in evidence every week. When they come the first time, many folks just can't believe it .. the food, warmth, loving atmosphere. They keep coming back, bringing friends, to this safe haven at St. John's. I overheard one guest tell a newcomer, "Oh, man, you're gonna love it .. it's such a good church!" Such a simple statement, but it sure says a lot. ...*

*...In the past 4 years, the feeling of "family" has grown. We try to use the first names of folks when we do know them. Whenever we know the date of someone's birthday (& we're not swamped!) we get the whole room involved in singing "Happy Birthday." Chatting and joking with folks, we believe, is another way to enjoy one another's "humanness."*

*And how has the LTE permeated the whole congregation? I think it has made everyone more open, tolerant, and brave! Many years ago we would've been afraid to open our doors like this. But we certainly have learned a lot from this experience ... and been blessed greatly!<sup>61</sup>*

## **Focus Groups**

Following the first three sermons about communion, we held our first round of three focus groups to further explore the congregations' understanding and experience of communion. To select participants we developed a comprehensive list of persons (members and non-members) who attend worship at St. John's (either on Wednesday or Sunday) with regularity (more than an estimated 12 times a year). One member of the PPG called every third person on this list until she was able to schedule three full focus group sessions. A script and questions for each focus group were developed in advance (Appendix C). Three members of the PPG facilitated the focus group after reviewing guidelines on how to effectively facilitate such groups.<sup>62</sup> There was a recorder for each session, and each session was audio-recorded.

When asked to define *communion* in a word or a phrase, many people said "forgiveness," "cleansing" or "renewal." Other individuals responded with "community," "radical hospitality," and "*The Largest Table.*" While generally people had difficulty citing specific examples of how my preaching helped them broaden their understanding of communion, each of the groups talked with ease about the compassion, justice, and inclusion they could see at St. John's. I found it striking that long-term

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<sup>61</sup> Lee Reiner, field note presented to Kathy Dwyer February 2, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Dale J. Dwyer, "Conducting Focus Groups" unpublished paper, 2007.

members were quick to talk about how these distinctive experiences represented a different congregation from the one they experienced only a few years before, while more recent members or friends of the church perceived the happenings of the past year as just a natural extension of the “extravagant welcome” that St. John’s extends. A noted highlight from the year in which these focus groups were held included a vote by our consistory to officially become an open and affirming congregation.

The second round of focus groups was held in November of 2008. The approach was similar. Again, we called members and people who attend frequently, until three sessions were filled. A script and questions for each focus group were developed in advance (Appendix D). Three members of the PPG, different members from the first three, again facilitated the focus group after reviewing guidelines on how to effectively facilitate such groups.<sup>63</sup> There was a recorder for each session, and each session was audio-recorded.

These focus groups differed slightly from the first in that a question was not specifically asked about my preaching, but this time more people brought up my preaching or the liturgy in response to the questions that were asked. When asked to define *communion* in a word or a phrase, there were some who said, “forgiveness of sins,” or “purity,” but most of the respondents said things like, “community,” “participation,” “welcome through God,” or “connection,” or “fellowship with God.”

When asked about how their understanding and experience of communion has changed over the past couple of years, people frequently mentioned how we have “done

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

it” differently. We used to primarily receive communion in the pews, and now we most often come forward to receive communion by intinction. We have been celebrating communion with increasing frequency. In addition, this past year I have experimented with several different means of receiving communion such as serving one another in the pews or serving one another as we come forward. All of these different styles were noted as contributing to their experience of the sacrament feeling more participatory and communal.

In addition, participants restated specific words they hear me say on a continuous basis either in the opening welcome to worship (“Whether this is the first time you are here or you have been here all of your life, we are glad you have joined us this morning. Whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey, you are always welcome here.”); the words of assurance (“From the beginning of time, God has loved you. God loves you today and will love you forever. There is nothing you can do and nothing you can ever say that will separate you from the love of God.”); and several noted the words of invitation to the Table (“this may look like a small table, but it is the largest table in the world, open to anyone who seeks to know the living Christ, especially the stranger”). As I listened to each of the audio-recordings, I became aware that these repeated phrases have become part of our communal language.

With the second focus group, we introduced the topic of table fellowship; this was something that was relatively easy for the groups to discuss. Within each group there was someone who identified table fellowship with a family meal, but there were responses in each group that took this concept much deeper. Among the comments were

statements such as, “Communicating and getting to know better those who you’re eating with,” “Feeding the body and soul,” “Community—an act of giving to those you’ve invited to the table,” “The whole world flowing with food,” “a table that is set for communion,” “Risk with people you may not know or feel uncomfortable with,” “the importance of diversity through “potluck” metaphor.”

What was even more fascinating was the readiness with which the groups were able to give examples of how they have seen these elements of table fellowship in action. From experiences within the church like the coffee hour, joys and concerns within the service, new partnerships and mission efforts with which the congregation has become engaged, and our recently becoming an open and affirming congregation, it is apparent that the participants in these groups define and experience table fellowship in very broad terms.

In a similar manner, participants were able to identify times they have experienced “*The Largest Table Effect*.” One person cited the diversity that is permeating our congregation. Another mentioned our mission work and the food pantry. Yet another person, a relatively new member, said, “I have never been to *The Largest Table*, but I have experienced it. We wouldn’t have come to a church that wasn’t inclusive and non-judgmental; we were drawn in by the banners on the outside of the building” (NOTE: the banners, hung on either side of our front doors, list St. John’s five core values: Love, Acceptance, Faith, Mission and Outreach, and Children).

Finally, the groups were asked to comment on how their understanding of compassion, justice, and inclusion has developed and which acts of compassion, justice,

and inclusion they could envision doing at St. John's or elsewhere. Several people mentioned how their understanding has grown through *The Largest Table* and through the acceptance they experience at St. John's. There were people who expressed having become involved with various groups or projects (e.g., the annual homeless count, the YWCA, Commons at Grant, the Open Shelter),<sup>64</sup> and there were others who indicated an attitudinal shift, saying that they now felt more able and willing to take risks. Another said, "Some of my experiences here have fueled my thinking about how people can sit down together to solve their problems; this is of great value in small group interactions. We take it for granted, but it can be really transforming."

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to both the surveys and the focus groups. Among them are that these surveys were anonymous. We do not know if any persons from the group who responded to the first survey also responded with new thoughts or experiences to one of the subsequent surveys. We cannot say with any certainty how many of the respondents to the pre-survey have changed or broadened their views. We cannot determine if there were any respondents who were present at all of the sermons, nor how this series of sermons contributed to their experience. Neither can we measure how experiences outside of the worship service (e.g., conversations, reading material, or experiences within or outside of our congregation) have influenced the perceptions of the sacrament of communion held by the congregation.

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<sup>64</sup> The missions listed are all local Columbus, Ohio endeavors.

In addition, the number of respondents represented a limited snapshot of the congregation. On September 16, 2007 (survey 1), we had 123 in worship and 27 respondents. On November 4, 2007 (survey 2), we had 108 in worship and 17 respondents. On January 14, 2008 (survey 3), we had 117 in worship and 25 respondents. On September 14, 2008 (survey 4), we had 113 in worship and 22 respondents. On October 12, 2008 (survey 5) we had 126 in worship and 28 respondents.

We were able to observe that through hearing sermons some members of the congregation thought they had broadened their experience and understanding of communion, and some were able to articulate their understanding of this theologically. Of the people who responded to the post-survey on communion (19), it was interesting to note that the majority of respondents associated celebration (15) and love (14) with communion. During the pre-survey, while several people associated the sacrament with the feeling of love, no one specifically associated communion with celebration and only four people mentioned the communal nature of communion.

There were obvious limitations to the focus groups as well. While the groups represented a good cross-section of our congregation, the participation was voluntary and was likely engaged in by individuals who felt a good connection to the congregation and are actively involved. Participants also understood that these focus groups were an aid for my thesis writing, and I am sure that most people wanted to generally be helpful although they were not clear about what I was seeking.

In addition, unlike a survey where each response is individualized, in a focus group one answer can build on another. The flow of each group is highly dependent on

the skill of the moderator as well as the dynamics of the group composition. All of this underscores how this data is qualitative rather than quantitative. For all of these reasons, it is important not to overstate the outcomes of the results. However, there has unquestionably been significant change within our congregation, and this data supports that some of this change has been affected through specific changes I employed in preaching.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

I began by sharing my own surprise about finding myself doing research on the sacrament of communion. I conclude by realizing that while there has been much theological work on the sacrament of communion, the field of homiletics can be enriched by further emphasis on how preachers and worship leaders might more effectively bridge the roles of Word and sacrament within worship. In the Protestant tradition, there is more emphasis placed on verbal and cognitive communication and much less of an emphasis on ritual and mystery. While the scope of this paper does not permit me to explore this issue fully, it is worth noting that changing the style in which we took communion seemed to deepen the meaning of the sacrament for those participating. Might this have been because the change of style drew more attention to the ritual and perhaps heightened the sense of mystery? Might the traditional lack of attention to ritual been a detriment to members taking an active role in the surveys, etc. that they were invited to complete? These are questions that point to other areas that might provide fruitful study.

Writing this paper has been a gift to me, not only because it has helped me crystallize some of my own learning, but because I have begun to see with new eyes the

importance of the role of preaching, specifically within a congregation and a community of people. Much of this paper has been about how, as a preacher, I have wanted to use preaching as a vehicle for change. However, the change I have been inspired to effect has come from my experience within the community. My growth as a human being and a pastor is a result of living with and working side-by-side beautiful, faith-filled people who have shown me firsthand what it is to be the body of Christ. I think what I have learned has implications for every preacher, as well as those who are serving the urban church.

#### Implications for Every Preacher

1. **Pay attention to your life and to the life of your congregation.** Frederick Buechner says it as well as anyone I know: *“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”*<sup>65</sup> The life experiences I have been welcomed into and have shared with the congregation have shaped me as a person. It is in my daily interaction with others that faith most vividly comes to life, and provides the best sermon material.
2. **Dig deeper and allow yourself to feel.** After the intensity of a difficult day it is

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<sup>65</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 2.

easy to want to tune out rather than tune in. However, repeatedly I have found that when I have paid attention to what is going on around me, allowed myself to experience the emotion associated with it, and then found theological words to describe what I have experienced, I am in a better position to lead someone into a similar experience through imagination. In other words, the preacher must understand his or her own experience and be able to reflect on it, in order for her to be able to help others do the same.

3. **One sermon can have an impact and, occasionally, it has something to do with the preacher; often it does not.** From the sermon evaluations it was clear that individual sermons can and do make a difference. Sometimes it is an impact that is intended, but other times it is not. In response to one of the sermons on table fellowship, one listener commented how this emphasis had helped her with her recovery from an eating disorder. Another person, in response to my sermon on psalm 23 and “eating with your enemies,” was inspired to work toward reconciliation with her brother. Jennings’ model has helped me understand the significance that every individual’s life experience brings to their ability to experience something new and reflect on it.
4. **“One Gospel, Many Ears.”**<sup>66</sup> With every sermon response form and with every focus group, this truth was affirmed. People hear and interpret each sermon differently. This makes it all the more important to use a variety of methods,

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<sup>66</sup> Joseph R. Jeter Jr. and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002).

forms, and techniques to communicate. What is effective for one person may not be effective for another.

5. **Language and ritual are important.** I link language and ritual together, because I have come to believe that how we describe what we do is very important. One of the tasks of the preacher is not only to help the listener enter a meaningful experience, but also to give language to it. St. John's is developing a common language that describes who we are as a people and as a congregation. The rituals with which we engage now support and enhance the language and vice versa. In the focus groups we observed people reaching for this common language to describe their experience. In other words, language and ritual support one another.
  
6. **The imagination is a powerful and complex tool.** Because every person bundles and unbundles their reproductive reality to create new and different productions, the imagination is ignited in a myriad of ways. I have noticed that often a story or an image will pull at someone's heart before they are ready to make a definitive statement about what this means or why the image is important. I can see emotion in a listener or someone will tell me about how a story "moved" them without elaborating as to why. Carefully developed images can also be a springboard for someone to assign their own meaning. For example, one person wrote about the image I had developed of a big bin of laundry: "*The "big bin of*

*laundry” reminded me of my ‘big list of to do’s.’ I get overwhelmed, tired and bitter, unless I take time out to celebrate the love, joy and abundance in my life.”<sup>67</sup>*

7. **“The longest trip is from the head to the heart.”** Change takes a long time.

One sermon, or even a sermon series, does not change a congregation.

Congregational change is a painstakingly slow process in which preaching plays a part. I don’t want to underestimate or overestimate this role that is both a burden and a privilege, and yet through this process I have come to appreciate how the congregation often looks to the preacher to give theological language to the experiences they are having. By this I do not mean big words that are difficult to understand, but rather language that brings meaning to common experience.

At the beginning of this thesis, I set forth the notion of “*The Largest Table Effect*,” which became the goal I hoped the congregation would aspire to and eventually achieve. Certainly, this is an ideal. Not even Jesus’ disciples were able to do what they wanted to do all of the time! The process has been slow; yet, the comments from members of the congregation seem to support much movement in this direction. More so, when we look at where we have been and where we are now, it is easy to see the progress.

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<sup>67</sup> Sermon feedback forms from October 12, 2008.

## Implications for Preachers in the Urban Church

There are further implications from what I have learned that specifically relate to the context of the urban church. Much has been written of the challenges of the urban church and many have tried to provide formulas for turning around dying congregations. Most will say that congregations need to reach out to the community and develop an “outward” focus; they will say that congregational renewal is hard work and takes time. All of this is true.

When I came to St. John’s I knew all of that with my head. What I have learned with my heart is that this work isn’t about building churches; it is about becoming more fully the body of Christ. As our congregation becomes more and more diverse, as we develop more partnerships in the community, as we see new gifts developed and passion for serving growing, I see and understand the body of Christ more clearly. I know my task as the preacher is to give it voice, to build and share images so that all who enter can reflect upon and act with compassion, justice, and inclusion.

*The Largest Table* is different today than it was a year ago, and far different from the year before that. Every vital church will always be changing. At the beginning the challenge was to overcome fear and find volunteers and, of course, to figure out how to pay for it. Today, we still have to raise money but we are more concerned with managing the chaos that usually erupts in the kitchen when there are too many people trying to do the same thing or figuring out a way for all the people with jobs to get their meal during their limited lunch hour when there are 300 people who want to be served at the same time.

This year Christmas Eve fell on a Wednesday, and months before Christmas our regular volunteers began to think carefully about how to plan for *The Largest Table* on this day. No one wanted to close our doors. It was challenging because many of our volunteers live a distance away and would also want to be at St. John's for our evening service. Other volunteers were leaving town or were having family arrive that would take them away for this particular day.

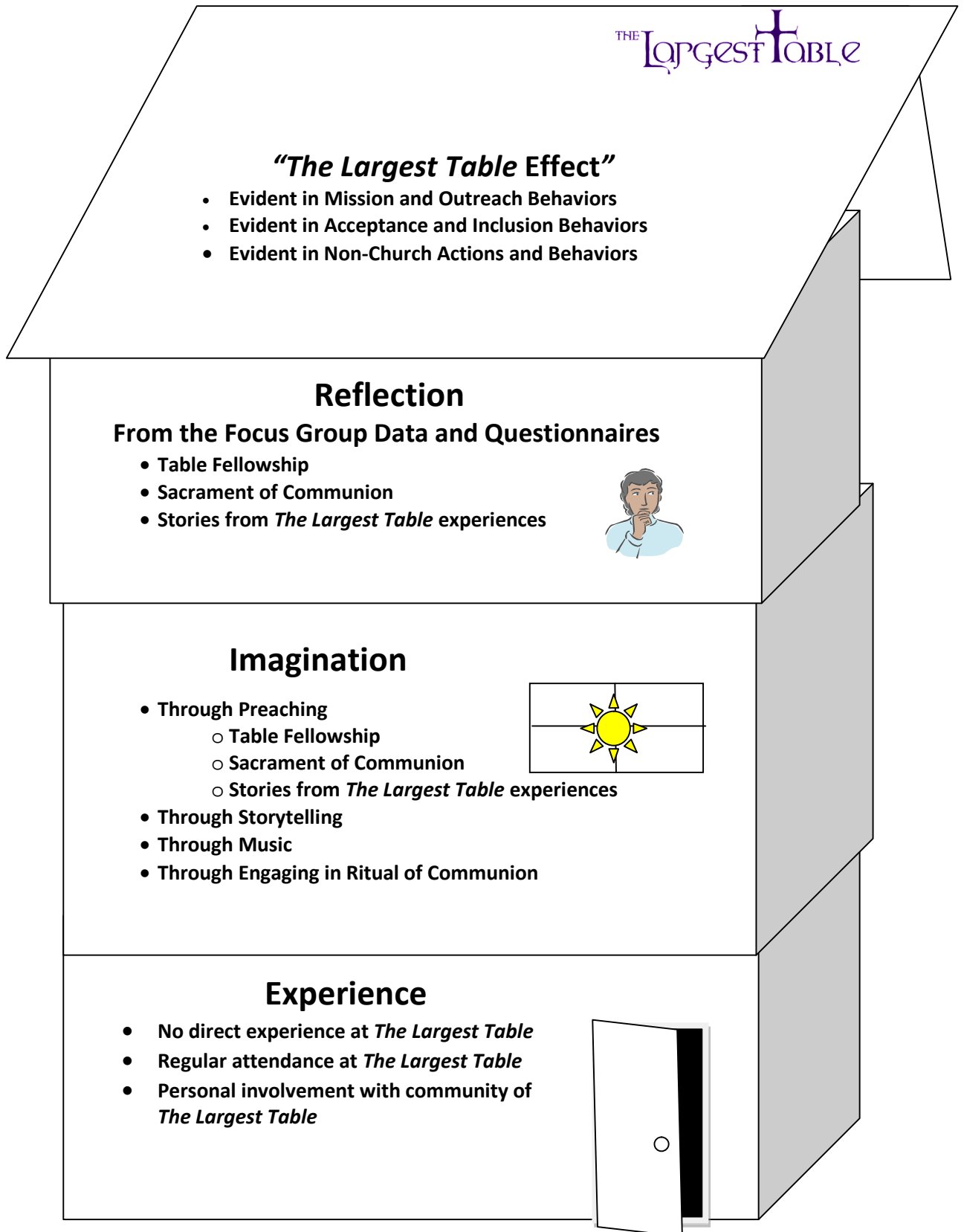
It seemed as though we had just begun talking about how we would manage it, when a family in our congregation stepped forward and said that their whole family would take responsibility for the day. Not only would they "cover" the meal, they would make a full ham dinner complete with homemade biscuits!

Later I learned that this family of four generations changed a long-held family tradition in order to do this. Every Christmas Eve morning, this extended family had always gathered at a local Frisch's, where the servers know their names and anticipate their arrival for their annual Christmas brunch where they all indulge in the buffet. Their time together was their family's way of heralding in Christmas every year. But this year, they recast their family tradition and gathered for breakfast in our Fellowship Hall before cooking lunch.

I wasn't there for breakfast, but I heard about it. They not only brought breakfast for themselves, but for the staff, and whoever happened to appear. It wasn't official communion, it was real communion.

It was "*The Largest Table Effect*."

Figure 1 Model of the Creation of “The Largest Table Effect”



**Table 1: Assessment of Perceptions of Table Fellowship**

Luke	Pre-Thesis	Post-Thesis
<p><u>5:27-33 (Levi)</u>            Invitational            Banquet            Diversity            Inclusion            Place at the Table            Enemy            Broadening Community            Mutuality</p> <p><u>7:36-50 (Woman and Jar)</u>            Place at the Table            Invitational            Opportunity to Give            Acceptance            Inclusion</p> <p><u>9:10-17 (5000)</u>            Welcoming            Hospitable            Sharing            Groups            Breaking and Blessing            Serving            Abundance            Collaborative</p> <p><u>10:1-11 (Mission 70)</u>            Welcoming            Mutuality            Openness to Receiving            Interaction            Kingdom of God            Non-coerced hospitality            freedom</p> <p><u>10:38-42 (Mary/Martha)</u>            Welcoming            Abundance of help            Mutuality of benefits for guest and host            Hospitable</p>	<p>Individual Piety            Who's Allowed Inside            Concerns About Dress</p>	<p>Receiving            Sharing            Interaction            Inclusion            Openness            Broadening Community            Acceptance            Diversity            Abundance            Creative Prob-Solving            Relational            Generosity            Hospitable (non-forced)            Community-oriented            Mutuality            Welcoming            Serving            Met Needs            Collaborative            Opportunity to Give            Celebration            Gratitude            Messy/Conflicted            Covenantal            Salvation            Kingdom of God            Companionship ("with bread")            Freedom</p>

<p><u>14:7-14 (Banquet Places)</u>  Invitational  Notions of Honor and Shame  Repayment  Servanthood/Serving  Kingdom of God</p> <p><u>15:22-32 (Prodigal)</u>  Hospitable  Celebration  Welcoming  Relational  Interaction  Acceptance  Messy/Conflicted</p> <p><u>19:1-10 (Zaccheus)</u>  Welcoming  Sharing  Abundance  Inclusion  Generosity  Notions of Honor and Shame  Salvation</p> <p><u>22:14-20 (Last Supper)</u>  Place at the Table  Relational  Salvation  Covenantal  Gratitude  Sharing  Kingdom of God  Giving  Presence of Enemy</p> <p><u>24:13-35 (Emmaus Rd)</u>  Invitational  Hospitality  Place at the Table Gratitude  Companionship  Revelation  Interaction</p>		
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## APPENDIX A: Pre and Post Communion Survey

Do you look forward to receiving communion? (check one)

Always \_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ Never \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the words that you associate with the feeling of communion:

Meditative    Inclusion    Forgiven    Loved

Community    Abundance    Compassion    Acceptance

Relational    Private    Generosity    Celebration

I understand the sacrament of communion to mean:

## APPENDIX B: Five Sermons on the Sacrament of Communion

### ***Sermon One: No Innocent Bystander***

A Sermon Based on John 6:1-14

#### **Romans 12:3-18**

*3For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. 9Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*

#### **John 6:1-14**

*6After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 10Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain top by himself.*

A couple of weeks ago, on the Friday before the Buckeyes played Youngstown State, I had lost my voice and went to see my doctor. I was sitting in her office, feeling completely drained. My head was beating, I had lost my voice, and I was anxious, wondering if I was going to be able to gain back my strength and my voice before Sunday. I'm holding my head, feeling as though if I don't it might fall off. And in she walked – full of the energy I wanted. Under her white coat was a lovely black and white dress and on her feet were red shoes. Even with as miserable as I was feeling, I noticed the shoes. “Nice shoes,” I offered with the smile I was able to manage. She had already started typing something into the computer, but with a sideward glance and a little laugh she said, “These are my Ohio State Friday shoes. It didn't take me long to learn.” Having been in Columbus for just a little over a year, she quickly learned that nearly all of Columbus wears red the Fridays before the Bucks play football.

Those of you who know the Hahn's will not be surprised when I tell you about one of my visits to see Gary in the hospital this week. He had gotten through the surgery, was moved up to the rehab floor, and was looking forward to yesterday when they could watch the game. Gary was there, with JoEllen at his side, and he told me how they would have the tailgate party right there in the hospital. Jo was going home that night to make an array of food, and the family would gather there, as well as other patients on the floor. In the midst of telling me about all this, Gary's enthusiasm grew. He is wearing a neck brace, and as he shared with me the plans, he lifted his head and moved his eyes over near the closet: “Jo,” he said, “show the pastor what Howard brought me!”

Howard is Gary's son. And before JoEllen opened the closet door, she offered an explanation. “Howard was concerned that Gary would have trouble getting his Buckeye shirts over his brace and so he went down to Conrad's today and this is what he got.” JoEllen pulls out a button-down Buckeyes shirt. It has the cut of a Hawaiian shirt, and amidst the scarlet and gray and footballs that are on it, there are also a bunch of gray palm trees. Gary and JoEllen couldn't have been more delighted that Gary was fit with proper attire for the game yesterday!

On YouTube there is a brief video that is getting a lot of play. It is of a two-year old girl, dressed in red and raising her hands up saying, “O-H, O-I!” She doesn't quite have the spelling down, but she is well on her way to becoming a great Buckeyes fan!

In Columbus, Ohio in the fall—in doctors' offices and hospital rooms, in living rooms, and restaurants, and in the stadium of course—people wear clothes that are scarlet and gray, they sing funny chants, and cheer so loud and long they lose their voices. They come from all walks of life and at any other time might appear one to the other as complete strangers. But when the national anthem is sung and the game kicks off, the crowd becomes a community.

At a football game, we sing the national anthem.  
At a concert, the orchestra tunes their instruments.  
In a classroom, the bell rings.  
On that mountain, where the crowds had come, Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.”

Make the people sit down. It’s as if he is saying, “Watch this. Something is about to happen. This crowd is going to become a community.”

At the beginning of the passage, the narrator of the story sets this up. He tells us that Jesus asked Philip what he should do to feed all the people as a test. Jesus was testing Philip. He already knew what he was going to do about the crowds he saw coming. But Philip doesn’t really have any idea. Andrew chimes in that he sees a boy who has some food, but he knows that won’t be enough. Every person, every element is important to what is about to happen. There are no innocent bystanders in this story. Indeed, nothing would happen in this story without the 5,000 people who actually *received* the meal.

Once the meal was over, there were some who wanted to take Jesus and force him to be king. They were so amazed at what he was able to do it. But that wasn’t what Jesus wanted them to see. When they knew they were after him to be king, he withdrew to the mountaintop.

I have to think that Jesus was thinking back on this amazing day when he was gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room for the Last Supper. We hear the same words: *Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them...* Come with me there. He knew his life was coming to an end, and he gathered the people closest to him around him. Have you been in a situation like that—knowing that your time was limited with someone you loved? Undoubtedly, each person at that table is thinking about their personal relationship with Jesus, what he means to them, what they are going to miss most about him. They try to hold it together so that the lump in their throat doesn’t give way to tears. They want to be fully present to the moment because they know that there aren’t too many moments left, but they find themselves going deep within themselves wondering how they are going to manage without him.

And Jesus is certainly thinking about each of them individually, but he is also thinking of them together. Like the parent who pleads with his children to take care of each other, knowing that he has always watched over his children and provided help when they needed it, he says, “Take care of each other. There will be lots of challenges, and there will be lots of needs, but TOGETHER you can carry on and do even greater things than I. I have done what I can do here, but you have each other.”

**Communion is what God does through the action of the people in community.**

Through the coming together. Through a willingness to both give and receive. Through seeing gifts in others and pulling them forth and finding gifts and grace in the most

unsuspecting places. In communion—In community—there is not one innocent bystander. Each person is important.

I recently heard a pastor talk about the difficulty of serving communion in a congregation that isn't your own<sup>68</sup>. Every congregation does things a little differently. Some places communion is served in the pews. Some places the people come forward. This summer, when I worshipped at Trinity UCC, the largest UCC church in the country, I was given a little disposable pack with a wafer and the juice all in one little container so that the moment the preacher said, "Take and eat" ... the thousands of us who were there could all open our little pack and eat together!

Then there is the issue of who is welcome at the table. This pastor shared that on one specific Sunday he had reviewed the mechanics of communion with someone at the church, but he had not talked with anyone about WHO could receive it. In some churches, everyone comes forward, and if a person doesn't want to receive or is not allowed to receive it, they simply put their arms across their chest as a sign. On this particular Sunday, a little girl came forward with her hands open eager to receive. As the deacon saw the girl approach, he whispered in the pastor's ear, "Children don't receive communion until they are confirmed." The pastor had to make a split-second decision, and he decided not to give this girl the bread. When he shook his head "no" he saw the tears well up in her eyes and watched as she walked away. That moment has kept him up at nights, and he counts that one decision as one of his greatest regrets in ministry.

Soon after the girl had come down the aisle, a boy followed. This boy was older, probably a teen, and the deacon looked at the preacher and nodded affirmatively. As this boy approached, he said "Please give me a nice big piece!" And as the pastor did that the boy said, "I want to give some to my little brother!" From the time we are a child, each of us long for connection and communion.

Even the smallest child can understand, "Take, eat ... this is for you as an act of love." And like the two-year-old on YouTube learning the O-H-I-O chant and donning the colors scarlet and gray, learning to be a Buckeye fan, we come to this table, and eat of a common loaf and cup, so that we might learn how to be at every table. This is about way more than football. It is about life and love and LIVING COMMUNION—where gifts and graces come from the most unsuspecting places.

As you come forward to the table today, look around. There is not one innocent bystander here. Each of us is a part of the wholeness that comes through Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>68</sup> The Rev. Dr. Craig Satterlee in a sermon at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, July, 2007

## **Sermon Two: *In the Presence of Mine Enemies***

A Sermon Based on Psalm 23

### **Luke 22:19-21**

*19Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."*

*20And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."*

*21But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table."*

### **Psalm 23**

*1The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

*2He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*3He restoreth my soul:  
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.*

*4Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil:  
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*5Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.*

*6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

It could have been any demonstration, but this one happened to be over the death penalty.

When the first execution in Ohio was about to take place, after the death penalty had been reinstated sometime in the 1990's, there was a protest. This wasn't just a little protest; there were all sorts of people who were impassioned and felt as though taking a stand might make a difference. There are rules involved if you are going to protest at the Governor's Mansion in Bexley. A permit is needed. Security is needed. Everyone must maintain calm.

The organizer of this particular protest was named Jim. Jim was charged with being sure that the protest was both passionate and positive. As the crowds grew and as emotions were heightened, he realized hours had passed, and people had to be getting hungry. Jim

called out for pizza, and pizza came by the car-full. There was pizza for the protesters. Pizza for the media. Pizza for the police and the security guards and all of the people inside the governor's mansion. There was vegetarian pizza for the vegetarians, pizza with no sausage for the Jewish folks, cheese and pepperoni pizza for the kids, and Donato's signature pizza, the Founders Favorite – with pepperoni, sausage, ham, hot peppers, and aged provolone cheese!

They all ate pizza. And the protesters kept protesting, and the guards kept guarding.

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***

Sara Miles, author of *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, wrote about her life and her discovery of faith and Christianity. Sara was raised in a home where her parents taught her good morals, but didn't want to have anything to do with faith. Sunday mornings were spent with big family breakfasts, reading the *New York Times*, and listening to classical music. Early in her career she worked in a restaurant and later was a journalist, often spending time in war zones. Only after she became a Christian was she able to look back on some of these experiences and see God in them. Her earlier experiences helped shape her understanding of communion. This is some of what she wrote about her experience in war zones:

*I saw all around me how fear and need drove people to terrible betrayals. Yet over and over, I also saw how war created a community, a people, and how that community was nourished by gestures of sharing – and whether it was fake fast-food chicken nuggets or an unadorned chunk of carrot with the dark earth still clinging to it, what mattered to me was not what I ate. What mattered to me in those years, when everywhere I was wasn't home, was that I could launch myself into a morning, an unknown town, a war zone, and be fed – usually by strangers and sometimes by comrades, occasionally by enemies, but always by someone as hungry as I was or hungrier. We had hunger in common, and we had food.<sup>69</sup>*

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***

The call came to a man we will call Howard. He hadn't talked with his Dad or any of his five brothers or sisters in several years. The last time they were together they had all been so angry. Howard couldn't even remember what sparked the fight, but he remembers many of the things that were said that day, though he kept trying to erase them from his memory. It was a litany of every bad thing every one of them had done to the others – the lying, the betrayals, the name calling. On that one day, years ago, Howard had decided he had had enough and hadn't returned for another holiday or family event since then. Howard had tried to block out the memories, not only of that one bad night but of all the missteps before that. He focused on his job in Denver. He tried to be

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<sup>69</sup> Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (Ballentine Books: New York, 2007) pp 42-50

a good husband and father. It was a Saturday when the phone call came. He might not have answered it if he had seen the caller id, but his daughter picked it up and brought it out to him in the garage where he was working. Perhaps knowing that he might hang up if she began with any pleasantries or even telling him who she was, his sister didn't waste any time: "Dad died. A massive heart attack. The funeral is on Tuesday."

He booked a flight and came home. He met up with the family at the funeral home toward the end of the first slot of visiting hours. Very few words were spoken, but there were warm embraces, and there were tears. During the break from visiting, the family – all of them – went to a little diner across the street, and over hamburgers, grilled cheese sandwiches, and tomato soup, they shared stories, more tears, and even laughter.

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***

I don't know about you, but I have always heard this psalm as if it were written just for me. I can get swept up in the imagery of God leading ME to green pastures and still waters, and restoring MY soul. I can feel assurance that God is with me in the darkest valleys of my life and will lead me through the hard times. And yet, if we really read what the psalm is saying – it is not just for one of us or some of us, but for all of us. The table which God is hosting, the house in which we are all invited to dwell, includes not just some of us, but all of us.

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***

The table where Jesus gathered his disciples together for the Last Supper wasn't a simple gathering of the friends of Jesus. Included at that table was Peter, who had already fumbled the ball a few times, and Judas who was about to betray him. Jesus gathered them together that night and told them that when they ate and drank to remember their time with him. Remember what life with him was like. Remember what he stood for! Don't you think he told them to "Do this in remembrance of me" because he knew we would keep forgetting?

We forget that God loves everyone.

We forget that God wants peace, not war.

We forget that whatever our differences or our squabbles, God is bigger than all of that.

We forget that we are all joined as brothers and sisters in Christ and that we need each other.

We keep forgetting and God calls us back, together, to remember.

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.***

God has prepared a table for you and for me. And welcome to this table is the spouse you spat with over coffee this morning and the child who had a tantrum before going to bed last night. Welcome at this table is the colleague who you are sure said a blatant lie

in front of you last week and the woman you pass on the corner with hand outstretched with a cup for spare change. Welcome at this table are people who are for gay rights and those who are against them. Welcome at this table are those who are pro-life and pro-choice. Welcome at this table are those who have passed away and those who are living. Welcome at this table is the person you deeply love and the one whom you have difficulty looking in the eye.

The table to which we are all welcome is God's table. It is not my table, or May's table, or Richard or Mary's table. It is not an American table or a UCC table. It is God's table. It makes no difference whether at that table the bread is passed around or whether people come forward to receive it. It doesn't matter if the bread is a wafer or a homemade loaf of wheat bread. It doesn't matter if it is a common cup or those little plastic glasses. It doesn't matter if it is wine or juice or grapes fresh from the vine.

What matters is that God is the host, gathers us in, and helps us live with our differences.

***God prepares a table before each of us in the presence of our enemies.***

Amen.

### **Sermon Three: God's Pull**

A Sermon Based on Matthew 2:1-12

#### **Isaiah 60:1-5**

*60* Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. *2* For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. *3* Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. *4* Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. *5* Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

#### **Matthew 2:1-12**

*2* In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." *3* When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; *4* and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. *5* They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: *6* 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" *7* Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. *8* Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." *9* When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. *10* When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. *11* On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. *12* And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Every once in awhile I will get a call from someone in the community who is looking for an opportunity to volunteer and has heard about *The Largest Table*. I often wonder what prompts that first call, because often the person on the other end of the line doesn't know much at all about St. John's or what we do here on Wednesdays. They have either seen a little line in *The Other Paper* that regularly requests volunteers or have just heard about us somewhere. Usually there is both hesitation and inquiry in their voices, "uhh... yeah .. I heard you might need some help. Do you guys have a soup kitchen or something?"

I am always receptive to those on the other end of the line, and I always explain that we

are NOT a soup kitchen, we are a community—a community with no barriers that breaks bread together once a week over beautiful centerpieces, beautiful music, and home-cooked meals. We are not a soup kitchen, but a community that welcomes people from all walks of life and happens to serve many people who are homeless or marginally housed. I used to wonder what made them pick up the phone to call and whether or not they would stay with us. But I don't question it so much any more.

For I have come to realize that nearly everyone who calls on the phone or walks through the doors to *The Largest Table* comes because they are hungry and want to be fed. That hunger isn't always a physical hunger. But it is a hunger or a longing that is met here with food and love, companionship and support.

One of my favorite times of the week is walking into our kitchen on Wednesday mornings. Volunteers begin arriving about 9:30 or 10:00 and when I walk in, usually sometime between 11:00 and 11:30, there are fifteen or twenty people in our kitchen and Fellowship Hall. In addition to many of the familiar faces you know from around here, there are college professors, retired bankers, addicts who are trying to stay clean, people who live on the street or have lived on the street, and school teachers, all of whom who take their work here quite seriously. Occasionally at 11:30 there will still be work going on: chopping up stuff for the salad, cutting pies, and often bumping into one another with big pots and pans. Occasionally, the volunteers will be scurrying and fretting to get something into the oven in time. Occasionally there will be irritations, but more often than not when I walk into the kitchen, there is laughter and chatter:

“Hi Pastor Kathy! Check out this Twinkie pie!”

“We have all had a slice already! It is SOOOO good.”

“How about some of this dump cake! You have GOT to try it!”

I used to question what prompted people to call us and say, “Hey, do you need some help?” But I don't question it much any more. I have learned that each of us have a longing, a hunger for something, even if we don't always know what it is.

The magi must have had that longing, too. On the surface, it looked like they had everything they needed: a secure place to live, food to eat, and plenty of money. But yet, they saw the star and had to follow it. They saw the star and had to risk whatever it was they had to go and check it out, to see where it led. The magi were hungry for something ... they were longing for something.

Ala'a was longing for a Daddy and longing for a home. At the age of 9 he suffered from cerebral palsy so, like Christa, he had a strong mind and a strong will, but a weak body. He lived with 20 other children, all who had mental or physical disabilities in the Mother Theresa orphanage in Baghdad. In 2003, a military police unit began regular visits to the orphanage, and Ala'a developed a special connection to Captain Scott Southworth. As they got to know each other, Ala'a would recall with terror the bombs he had heard and enact them to Scott, “Bomb-bing! Bomb-bing!” he would say, raising and lowering his

fist. "I'm here now. You're fine." Scott would offer, trying to comfort him.

And it was a comfort. Secretly, Ala'a began to refer to Scott as "Baba" which was Arabic for "Daddy," and to himself, he would pray that Scott would take him home with him to America.

Scott will forever remember the day when one of the staff members told him that Ala'a was getting too big for the orphanage. The sister told him, "Best-case scenario is that he will stare at a blank wall for the rest of his life." Scott had no idea about the prayers Ala'a had been lifting up, but immediately, Southworth said, "I'll adopt him."

It made absolutely no sense, but there was a longing, a pull that he couldn't ignore. He didn't have a job, a wife, or a home. He knew nothing about raising a child with disabilities, and he had plans to run for political office when he returned to the States. Yet he couldn't turn his back on little Ala'a. It wasn't about doing something good, it was about following an instinct, a longing... a love.

On Christmas Eve the *Columbus Dispatch* ran an article that told the story of Scott and Ala'a and the challenges and obstacles Southworth faced in being able to bring Ala'a to the States. They are too long and involved for me to recount to you this morning. But there were numerous times when he could have given up and decided that this just wasn't in the stars, so to speak. Of his efforts, Scott said this, "We crossed political boundaries. We crossed religious boundaries. There was just a massive effort – all on behalf of this little boy who desperately needed people to take action and not just to feel sorry for him."

On December 16, 2004 he finally had everything in order and mailed his packet to the Department of Homeland Security. On New Year's Eve, his cell phone rang and it was Ala'a.

"What are you doing?" Scott asked.

"I was praying," Ala'a responded.

"Well, what were you praying for?"

"I prayed that you would come and take me to America."

Scott almost dropped the phone. Ala'a had known nothing of his efforts. When Scott was finally able to make it back to Iraq he was excited and relieved. He said, "He was in my custody then. I could hug him. I could hold him. I could protect him. And forever started."

Today Ala'a is 13 and thriving. Life is not perfect, and there is still much to learn for everyone involved .. but there are no regrets about following what seemed like an impossible longing.

What is it you are longing for? For what are you hungering? God pulls at each of us. And

the pull is never about something private and isolated from the rest of the world. God's pull on us brings us into the world and into relationship with those around us.

This star that the wise men followed did not stop over the holy of holies on a sacred mountain top. Rather, it stopped above a very human gathering – a mom, a dad, and a baby—trying to figure out how to feed and how to diaper and how to stay warm. That star and that longing pulled them into the messiness of humanity, and their lives were so changed by that moment that they knew they could never go back to the same life they had before.

Sara Miles was an atheist, and she was also a curious journalist. As she explains it, because she was curious, one day she walked into St. Gregory's Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco to see what was happening inside. She just walked in. That moment and the experience that followed changed her forever. There, she was offered communion and the celebrant made it clear that the meal was open to everyone, especially strangers. Still curious, she came forward. And what happened next she describes like this:

“I think what I discovered in that moment when I put the bread in my mouth and was so blown away by the reality of Jesus was that the requirement for faith turned out not to be believing in a doctrine, or knowing how to behave in a church, or being the right kind of person, or being raised correctly, or repeating the rituals. The requirement for faith seemed to be hunger. It was the hunger that I had always had and the willingness to be fed by something I didn't understand.”

Communion is a sacrament. And, as with all sacraments, communion helps us see the sacred in the ordinary. It not about the piece of bread. It is about hunger and being fed. It is not about what happens when it is just you and God, but what happens when two or three are gathered together.

Sara continued to follow that hunger and longing and ended up starting a food pantry at that church which serves hundreds of people each week. She writes about it in her book, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion*. If I could recommend one book to you at the beginning of this new year, this would be it.

Yesterday, I went to the Jackson Pike prison to visit Ava Dawkins on behalf of our church community. Ava and I visited for about an hour, and when I was getting ready to leave, Ava, with tears rolling down her cheeks, said, “Pastor Kathy, please send my love to everyone at St. John's and ask them to keep praying for me!”

“Ava, what do you want me to tell them?” I asked.

“Oh Kathy, you can tell them everything. I am not ashamed. I made a mistake. I KNOW I made a mistake, and when I get out of here my life will be a testimony. And so much of that testimony will be because of St. John's. When I go back there all of the girls will ask me, “What happened? Who was it? What is going on?”

(We placed our hands together on the glass that separated us, and Ava was laughing and crying at the same time.)

“And I will tell them it was my pastor. I have told them all about St. John’s! I keep talking about it and talking about The Largest Table. I say, “it’s this small WHITE church in downtown Columbus, and they all laugh at me and look at me with big eyes, but don’t be surprised if some of them show up. I told them that when I first came it was like I was just pulled in there. And it was like I was just pulled into warmth and love and support. I can’t tell you how much I needed that. And I can’t tell you the difference St. John’s has made in my life. Please tell them that.”

Ava felt a pull.

Amen.

***Around the Table: Our Place at the Table***

A Sermon based on Micah 6:6-8 and Luke 14:7-14

(Part one of six in a sermon series on the table fellowship scenes found in the Gospel of Luke)

**Micah 6:6-8**

*“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before god on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

**Luke 14:7-14**

*When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

*He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

“Here is your own little gas mileage log book.”

“Huh?”

“You are going to be driving soon so you will need one of these. Every time you fill up your tank, you need to write the date and the mileage on the odometer and exactly how much gas you put in your car.”

“Okay.”

“It’s really important. Don’t ever take this book out of your car. If you keep it in your glove compartment, it will always be there. I have already written at the top of the page what you need to put in each column. See ....”

“Okay.”

Eager to be driving for the first time, my friend didn’t ask many questions. He just took the book and dutifully did what he was told. And he kept doing it. When he filled up the book, he got a new one. And each time he got a new car, he transferred that little book into the next one. Year after year, every time he filled up his tank he made the proper notations in his little book, just as his Dad had shown him. Until, that is, he was married a few years ago, and his new wife asked the question:

“Honey, why do we have to record all of this stuff? What do you do with all of this?”

My friend was stumped.

“Well, I don’t really know. I just know my Dad told me it was really important. I guess I could ask him.”

Many years and few cars later this earnest young man went to his father and asked the question.

“Oh that,” his dad said. “We needed to do that because the VW bug you were driving then didn’t have a gas gauge! I wanted to be sure you wouldn’t run out of gas!”

How many times do we do something a certain way, without knowing exactly why, simply because we have always done it that way?

I think the ritual that we call the sacrament of communion is often like that. Throughout the centuries the way this sacrament has been observed has changed in many ways and for many reasons. I will save the full history lesson for a Sunday School class some time, but for now, here are a few bits of information.

In the early days when Christians celebrated communion, the ritual often looked more like a potluck with bread, wine, and a full meal. We see evidence of that in I Corinthians, the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, as well as some of the writings of the early apologists. Justin Martyr’s description of communion practices in the second century indicated that leftovers were taken to widows, prisoners, and the sick so that they would have something to eat. The intent of communion was not to create a quiet, private ritual as is often experienced today. Rather the intent was to bring the community together, to break down walls, and to recognize their common bond in Christ.

A sacrament is to be an outward sign of an inward reality. If we are intentional about this sign, about this meal of which we are about to partake, it ought to be working on us .. breaking down barriers and pulling us together as the people of God.

It sounds good. But when it comes right down to it, don't most us like to stick to what we know and be with the people with whom we are most comfortable?

I want you to think back for a moment. If you joined us for breakfast this morning take a moment to think about where you sat and with whom you sat. Before you sat down did you scan the room looking for someone you knew – someone with whom you felt comfortable – to sit with? Perhaps you didn't even come this morning, because you weren't quite sure who would be here, if you would know anyone, or feel comfortable. That would be perfectly natural. It is human nature to gravitate to people who are similar to us. And we are so quick to focus on our differences and what divides us.

The gospel invites us to disrupt our established pattern. When you go to take your place at the table, don't sit in the place of honor. Sit in the lowest place. And when you are inviting guests to a dinner, do not invite your friends – invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Invite someone who is different from you to sit down with you.

It often takes a tragedy like Katrina or Ike, or 9/11 to move us beyond our differences and realize our commonality. The day after the 9/11 tragedy, a popular French paper had the headline, "We Are All Americans." The article began, "When words seem so inadequate to express the shock that people feel the first thing that comes to mind is this: We are all Americans. We are all new Yorkers. How can we not feel profound solidarity with the United States?" It is difficult to imagine a European headline like that today, and yet it is that type of solidarity that I believe God longs for us to have with one another.

We don't need to experience a tragedy to get there. It can start by just getting to know those around us. Shirley was standing in line with her daughter at the grocery store when the clerk behind the counter asked her a question she had heard at least 40 times before. "What is she?"

Shirley swallowed every negative impulse inside her and said, "She's beautiful, smart, and well-behaved too." "Oh" the clerk replied, not getting the answer he wanted, and returning to the check out.

Shirley met her daughter, Rudy, while working as a children's audiologist. Rudy was a small, quiet, non-communicative 2 year old and Shirley describes feeling as though she were family almost immediately. Shirley is the whitest of white women, and Rudy is some indefinable combination of all that is beautiful from at least three races: curly dark hair, petite features, freckles, a golden tan skin tone, one blue eye and one brown. From

her mother's perspective - if her race had only one name, it would be perfection. But others question it all the time.

And Shirley's answers vary depending on the level of patience she has at that particular moment. When Rudy asks her mom to explain why people need to ask questions like that, she tells her not to worry, it's the answers that really matter. The questions of race and family can be complicated to be sure, but Shirley believes all of the answers can be found by seeing people first with the heart.<sup>70</sup>

Recently, however Rudy surprised her mom with her own response. There was a white-haired lady, standing right beside them, who asked if Shirley was Rudy's mother. Rudy turned to the lady with a disbelieving glance and said, "Well, she helps me with multiplication, fixes my hair, kisses me, and we both have freckles on our noses — who else could she be?"

The gospel invites us to disrupt our established pattern and get to know someone new. Ryan Griffin did, and it changed his life.

He was in the second grade when a new family moved in next door. The first time he saw his new neighbor was through the trees from his driveway. His neighbor, who was about his age, was wearing an orange t-shirt. Ryan was on the orange soccer team so he thought that this new boy must be on his soccer team, too. But he soon learned that wasn't the case.

The next day when he actually met his neighbor, Zach, Ryan noticed right away that Zach had difficulty walking and running. He didn't ask about the soccer team because even as a second grader Ryan could tell that Zach probably wouldn't be on the team. But that didn't hinder their friendship. Neither did Zach's slurred speech. Over time, Ryan came to be able to understand everything that Zach said. And they played all the games that second graders play – hide and seek, baseball, basketball, and games they would make up on their own. Sure, they sometimes had to modify the rules a bit, but they had a blast together.

They both loved sports and would often listen to games on the radio, especially the Cleveland Indians. Ryan would be the announcer and Zach would be the crowd.

They were in the same middle school together. The unspoken rule at the school was the person who brought the football made the rules. Ryan always brought the ball, and his rule was that no one could run on the first down but Zach. He wanted to be sure to find a way to include Zach in the game. It was the first time Ryan noticed how people in this world are sometimes not very nice, and it was that experience that convinced him that, as he puts it, "Sometimes people need a little boost."

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<sup>70</sup> NPR.org September 9, 2008

Ryan and Zach's friendship lasted long after they lived beside one another, but in 2001 Zach passed away at the age of 31 not because of his cerebral palsy, but because of a fast-advancing cancer that had not been detected. Today, Ryan not only has a son named after his best friend, but he is also training to become a special education teacher.

Ryan looked past Zach's differences and got to know his neighbor. Perhaps therein lies the answer to most of our world's problems.

The sacrament of communion is all about pulling us together as the people of God – about recognizing what we share in common rather than what drives us apart. If we are intentional about this sign then it ought to be working on us.

Paul Galbreath, a Presbyterian minister, writes about a couple he knew who were active in church but going through a divorce. They both continued to come to church; but, in order to avoid one another, they came and left through different doors and sat in different parts of the sanctuary. One Sunday, they were caught off guard. The pastor did communion a little differently that day and invited the congregation to get up and stand in a circle on the perimeter of the sanctuary. There was quite a bit of shuffling around, and this couple, who had been so intent on avoiding one another, ended up standing side by side. The bread and the cup were passed and each member of the congregation served the person beside them. When the bread and the cup came to this couple, they served one another. With tears streaming down their faces, they served one another. "This is the body of Christ broken for you." "This is God's love poured out for you." Their problems weren't solved, but around the table their bond in Christ was stronger than their differences.

May it be so for you and for me today.

Amen.

### ***Around The Table: Real Celebration***

A sermon based on Luke 15:11-32

(Part six of six in a sermon series on table fellowship scenes found in the Gospel of Luke)

Over the past several weeks we have been eating our way through the gospel of Luke. Not literally of course, but figuratively we have been grazing our way through many of the ten table fellowship scenes in this gospel. And with each stop we have approached the story we have found, not like a restaurant critic who evaluates the taste and presentation of the food, but as a curious guest with wonderment about why these particular tables have been set and what we might have to learn about what God wants for us through these experiences.

Today, we are not the only ones asking the questions. Just prior to the story I am about to share with you, the Bible says that here in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> verses of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, the scribes and Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them! What is up with THAT?”

And Jesus responds with three parables, each of which is about celebration. It’s almost as if he were saying, “Don’t for a moment think all this eating and drinking is accidental or just for convenience – this is the real deal.” He ends with an elegant, well-developed classic story that is a treasure chest for the imagination. There are many questions we could ask of this parable of the father with two sons, but today I want to zero in on the celebration we see happening. Why is the celebration so important?

### **Luke 15:11-32**

*<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is*

*alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.*<sup>25</sup> *“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.*<sup>26</sup> *He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.*<sup>27</sup> *He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’*<sup>28</sup> *Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.*<sup>29</sup> *But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.*<sup>30</sup> *But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’*<sup>31</sup> *Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*<sup>32</sup> *But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”*

"But we had to celebrate." That's what the father said, "We had to celebrate." Why? Does God just like a good party? I don't think that's quite it. The first son we meet knew how to celebrate, but it was reckless celebration fueled by greed. We know greed; is a sin.

In Tom Wolfe's novel, "The Bonfire of the Vanities", he reminded us of that as he profiled men who he thought were masters of the universe. He says, "If you feel you are a master of the universe, then a lot of rules just don't apply."

From the time we are very young children learning how to play Candyland or T-ball, we learn that rules matter. I think there are few things that make us more resentful than people around us who don't follow the rules.

November of 2005, ABC did a story on the rise and fall of Dennis Kozlowski, who you may remember was the CEO of Tyco. Drawing from an article written by James Stewart of "The New Yorker," they described his lifestyle: the airplanes, the cars, the courtiers, the chefs, that Kozlowski had really seemed like something that you would have expected to see at Louie the 14th's court at Versailles.

Stewart went on to write this, he said, "He was entitled to draw a very large salary legitimately. And, yet, he still decided, well, that was not enough. He first began cutting corners and then cutting more than corners and then just going full tilt until pretty much whatever he could get his hands on to the tunes of millions and millions and millions of dollars."

For his second wife's fortieth birthday, Kozlowski rented a five-star resort on the Italian island of Sardinia. Waiters in togas greeted guests while Jimmy Buffet, who had been flown in from Nantucket, serenaded them. He had this life-sized cake made in the image of his wife, and vodka was served out of an ice sculpture of Michelangelo's David. Now, that is a celebration. Reckless celebration.

And Kozlowski's downfall began with art. In particular, his failure to pay the New York State sales tax on several multimillion-dollar paintings. And when Kozlowski was locked up as a New York State inmate, there were many, many people all over America and all over the world who were smug with satisfaction.

"There, he gets what he deserves. That will show him. Locked up is exactly where he belongs."

The younger son in our story today may have legally been entitled to what he was given, but he was reckless with it. He wasted his share of what was given to him. I don't think that reckless celebration is what Jesus had in mind. But if the younger son was reckless, the older son was resentful and resistant.

Over the past couple of weeks, we have watched this big bailout unfold. And one image that has stuck through me through all of the newscasts we have seen on this was a brief interview with a woman who owned a laundromat. I don't remember what station it was on. It was all pretty quick.

What she said stuck with me far less than what I saw. She said something about how this bailout wasn't fair, how she owned her own business; and when things were tight, she cut back. She managed to pay her employees a fair wage and their benefits. Certainly owners of larger companies, from her perspective, should be able to do the same. She said something like that.

But what I saw is what stuck with me. What I saw was a woman who was weary from all the work she had been doing and still had left to do. Her hair was all disheveled. There was sweat dripping down her face, and there was this big bin of laundry that was hoisted on her hip like the piles of burdens that have mounted up on her.

She didn't say it, but I could see that this is a woman who had not taken time to celebrate in quite a while. I am sure she didn't feel as though she could take the time. She has to manage that laundromat. And if there is anything that is endless, it is laundry.

She had employees who needed to be paid. And when she got home, there were probably mouths to feed, grass to cut, toilets to clean. Maybe there was a son or daughter who she was trying to provide an education for so that he or she may have the opportunities she has not.

Celebrate? I don't think so.

I could hear the resentment that she had toward those who are getting this bailout in her voice. Whatever promises the government is making about the economic recovery were lost on this woman. She certainly does not want to celebrate this windfall for others, and

I am quite sure she isn't celebrating for herself. That big bin of laundry hoisted on her hip spoke volumes.

If the younger son was reckless, the older son was resentful and resistant. He sees this grand celebration in full swing. "What -- what is going on here? What am I? I'm the responsible one. He's the reckless one. I've done all this work. Doesn't it count for something? Haven't I earned something? Haven't I earned some kind of celebration, too?" Can't you hear the hurt and disappointment and resentment?

Neither of these sons get it. The father's notion of celebration was not about someone coming to his or her own senses. It was not about something that one person earned. They weren't celebrating a bailout. This celebration was about relationship. It was about connection. It was about a willingness to go beyond whatever mistakes had been made in the past. It was about a love that is stronger than death, stronger than the lure of prostitutes, stronger than the stock market, stronger than the laundry that will still be waiting tomorrow.

That was the real celebration. And it is what we celebrate each time we gather around the table in this place for the joyful feast of God.

One of the great blessings of my work here in this place is that I am constantly meeting people who teach me about what is really worth celebrating.

This past Tuesday, I visited with several older members of our congregation. I was sitting with one woman who is now confined to a wheelchair and is living in an extended care facility. And on Tuesday the sun was just shining right through the window, dancing off the light in her eyes and off her beautiful white hair. She had just had some lunch with some friends and was telling me about how much she had enjoyed the day. And at one point she leaned over and leaned in.

When somebody does that, I always listen a little more closely, because I know almost undoubtedly something sacred is going to be said.

"You know, at my age, Kathy, there really isn't a lot left to worry about. I just cherish the times that my friends come to visit. That is what's really most important. It is real celebration."

My next stop was to see Ed and Chloe Rose. Ed has been in the hospital for some back troubles and has had some complications develop with those back troubles, and so he is at an extended care facility that is close to the apartment where they live.

A security guard had brought Chloe, his wife, over at eight o'clock in the morning. And she was still sitting by his side when I arrived sometime around four o'clock.

After we had visited for a while, I asked Ed if he wanted me to place him on the prayer chain and share his concerns with all of you.

"Well, I'm not sure if anyone's going to remember us anymore there, but that would be great. Tell them to pray for me to come be home to celebrate Halloween."

"Halloween?"

"Well, that's the next holiday I can think of, and I want to get home. You know, next month," he said, "if Chloe doesn't leave me," with a little wink, "we will have been married for 60 years."

"How would you like to celebrate that, Ed?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "all I need to celebrate that is to have Chloe by my side. That is real celebration."

Then on Wednesday, when we were here for worship, I asked those who came to our noon worship service on Wednesday how they celebrated and what was important to them, what they celebrated and how they celebrated. And it happened to be the guests who were with us who happened to be homeless who were the most eager to respond.

One woman spoke of how, when there was a storm, she always knew a light was coming. Another talked earnestly about how he celebrates God's love for him and God's grace for him. Several hands were in the air eager to share reasons for celebration.

Over and over again I experience deep, deep spirituality and bright, strong hope in the people around me who happen to be very poor. Bill Casto, who works with the Columbus Coalition of Homeless, just this week in a meeting said, "There is a purpose for the poor among us, and it is in helping people like me."

I knew exactly what he was talking about. Every day I count it a privilege to be in ministry in this place where there are so many of you who teach me and show me what is really important and what is really worth celebrating.

If we have things, if we have stuff, like an asset portfolio or a good job or a home, we tend to put our trust in those things. We panic when they become unstable, and we celebrate as we rise higher in our career or amass more money or amass more stuff.

People who are poor, they don't put their trust in the stock market. They put their trust in God. When everything has been stripped away and what we find left is God, that truly is worthy of real celebration. I think it might be the kind of real celebration that Jesus was trying to help us understand. Amen.

APPENDIX C: Sample Sermon Feedback Form

Survey for Communion Sermons One, Two, and Three:

My feeling when taking communion today was:

As a result of today's sermon I have new thoughts or feelings about communion  
(or have had thoughts or feeling reinforced?) Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

If yes, please describe your new thoughts or feelings:

++++++

Survey for Communion Sermons Four and Five:

The sermon today made me feel:

The sermon today prompted me to think about or reflect upon:

As a result of today's sermon, I will:

APPENDIX D: Focus Group One Script

Questionnaire to be filled out before the session begins

What is your age

Male or Female

How many minutes do you drive to church?

How long have you been attending St. John's?

What age did you begin taking communion?

Have you ever been to The Largest Table luncheon on Wednesday?

If so, how often

Every week                      when I can                      once a month                      a few times a year

Once or twice                      never

+++++

**Welcome:** As everyone arrives, please have them fill out questionnaire. (We will not match this demographic information with specific answers. However, we want to be able to demonstrate that we have a diverse group.)

**Introduction:** *Read the following script:* Thank you for your willingness to participate with this focus group. This process will be very helpful to Kathy and the Parish Project Group, the group that is working with Kathy on her doctoral program. All of the information you provide today will be used as data for her thesis. We are tape recording as well as taking notes on this session so that we can be sure to capture your thoughts. I want to honor the timeframe of 90 minutes you were promised when Mary Bishop invited you to participate so I will be intentional about keeping track of the time and moving on to each of the questions we want to be sure are covered. It will be a good problem if we have more comments than time! However, please understand if I cut the conversation short so that we are able to move on to the next topic. If we find that there is more that you want to communicate than we have time for, you may either write down your additional comments or email them to me following this session.

**Questions to be asked to the group, in this specific order:** *note the minute notations next to each question – these timeframes will hopefully keep you on track*

:05 Define communion in a word or a phrase. What does it mean to you?

:15 How important is communion to you in a worship service? Why?

:25 Have you had an “ah-ha” moment in communion within the last two years? If so, please describe it.

:35 Through Kathy’s preaching, how has your experience of communion changed?

:50 One member of the congregation coined the phrase, “The Largest Table Effect” This person defined The Largest Table Effect this way: “*(The Largest Table Effect) is having a spirit permeate all members and actions (so that) all events and tasks automatically, without thinking, carry with them compassion, justice, and inclusion. To become the largest table means working to break down barriers – of ignorance, of fear, of distrust, of apathy. The same things Jesus faced!*” Describe how you have experienced “The Largest Table Effect”, other than through The Largest Table itself, at St. John’s.

1:03 Through Kathy’s preaching, how has your understanding of The Largest Table Effect developed?

1:15 How has her preaching about compassion, justice and inclusion caused you to see or do things differently, at St. John’s or elsewhere in the world?

1:25 Is there anything anyone would like to say that they have not had the chance to with regard to communion, Kathy's preaching, or The Largest Table Effect?

Thank you!

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP TWO SCRIPT

Questionnaire to be filled out before the session begins

What is your age

Male or Female

How many minutes do you drive to church?

How long have you been attending St. John's?

What age did you begin taking communion?

Have you ever been to The Largest Table luncheon on Wednesday?

If so, how often

Every week                      when I can                      once a month                      a few times a year

Once or twice                      never

+++++

**Welcome:** As everyone arrives, please have them fill out questionnaire. (We will not match this demographic information with specific answers. However, we want to be able to demonstrate that we have a diverse group.)

**Introduction:** *Read the following script:* Thank you for your willingness to participate with this focus group. This process will be very helpful to Kathy and the Parish Project Group, the group that is working with Kathy on her doctoral program. All of the information you provide today will be used as data for her thesis. We are tape recording as well as taking notes on this session so that we can be sure to capture your thoughts. I want to honor the timeframe of 90 minutes you were promised when you were invited to participate so I will be intentional about keeping track of the time and moving on to each of the questions we want to be sure are covered. It will be a good problem if we have more comments than time! However, please understand if I cut the conversation short so that we are able to move on to the next topic. If we find that there is more that you want to communicate than we have time for, you may either write down your additional comments or email them to me following this session.

**Questions to be asked to the group, in this specific order:** *note the minute notations next to each question – these timeframes will hopefully keep you on track*

:05 Define communion in a word or a phrase. What does it mean to you?

:10 What does the phrase “table fellowship” imply for you?

:15 Based on your previous answer, what are some of the most important elements in table fellowship? Have you seen those elements in our worship services or small group experiences? Where, specifically?

:35 In the last two years, has your experience of communion changed from your previous experience of communion? If yes, how has it changed?

:50 One member of the congregation coined the phrase, “*The Largest Table Effect*” This person defined *The Largest Table Effect* this way: “(*The Largest Table Effect*) is having a spirit permeate all members and actions (so that) all events and tasks automatically, without thinking, carry with them compassion, justice, and inclusion. To become the largest table means working to break down barriers – of ignorance, of fear, of distrust, of apathy. The same things Jesus faced!” Describe how you have experienced “*The Largest Table Effect*,” other than through *The Largest Table* itself, at St. John’s.

1:03 Have you attended *The Largest Table*? If not, how has your understanding of compassion, justice, and inclusion at St. John’s developed?

1:15 What acts of compassion, justice and inclusion could you imagine yourself doing differently, at St. John’s or elsewhere in the world?

1:25 Is there anything anyone would like to say that they have not had the chance to with regard to communion, Kathy's preaching, or *The Largest Table Effect*?

Thank you!

APPENDIX F: Focus Group Data

Focus Group Data—Golden Mergler (Nov 9, 2008)

Age	Gender	Minutes	Length	AgeCommun	LGT?	Frequency?
31	M	10	6	12	N	6
35	F	1	18	14	Y	4
42	F	10	48	20	N	6
43	M	5	36		N	6
46	M	25	144	13	N	6
49	M	10	228	8	Y	5
53	F	60	636	13	Y	1
60	F	25	3	6	Y	1
62	F	20	744	13	Y	1
65	M	20	72	25	Y	2
70	F	30	180	13	Y	4
71	M	30	180	14	Y	4
76	M	18	84	14	Y	2
78	M	15	108	14	N	6

(1) Word/Phrase Describing Communion

- Welcome through food
- Connection
- Purity
- Letting Go
- Meditation
- Reflection
- Inner-most sanctuary of Christian worship as a body
- Gathering together
- Community
- Belonging
- Purifying sins
- Giving power to God
- Children are never too young to understand “Take, eat”

(2) What Does “Table Fellowship” Mean?

- Family at table talking and sharing together
- Fun
- Bring what you have
- Sharing what you have
- Closeness
- Use to have a sense of guilt for having so much and over-exaggerated purpose of food, but don't feel like that now
- Learning about each other through talking
- Recognizing the differences and commonalities among each other
- Risk with people you may not know or feel uncomfortable with
- Conversation of give and take
- Community
- Importance of diversity through “potluck” metaphor

(3) Elements of Table Fellowship and where have seen them?

- “God loves you now, will love you forever...” [words of affirmation]
- In sermons
- Feeling connection at The Largest Table
- Asked to do a breakfast
- Cookie table after church
- Repetition each week of “whoever you are, wherever you are....”
- Would like to see name tags
- Greeters making everyone welcome whether they know them or not
- Sit with someone you don't know or invited to sit with someone unlike you
- Directory will help identify people by their pictures
- Some people have turned their lives around because of helpers at Largest Table going beyond just serving meals (Nobody has taken Nancy Raabe's place that really helps people with needs, except Open Shelter)
- Joys and concerns and “stand and greet those around you” creates openness
- “Pew Community”—little group of people who regularly sit together and keep track of each other

Question: what do you think are reasons these things are happening?

- Opportunity to get involved with church's wider mission
- Struggles with ONA discussion brought people together

(4) Has your experience of communion changed in past 2 years and how?

- The way we do it (use to pass it; now we go forward)
- Experience is more personal

- Everyone is welcome [...it may look like a small table, but...]
- How I feel about it has changed; use to feel like a routine, now it feels far more meaningful
- Being on consistory and serving communion makes me more emotional
- Children bringing in cups and bread or making the bread [sense of all belonging]
- Different types of bread representing different types of people

(5) How have you experienced “The Largest Table Effect”?

- Could take out LT and substitute St. John’s or UCC or Christianity effect...same thing
- Worried about financial aspect after we lost our renter, but after fixing food for it, I feel really good about it
- Gained new members
- Recognizing and welcoming new people each Sunday
- Extends to food pantry to help others
- In every sermon
- Barriers are being broken down all the time; everyone’s welcome
- Discussion of expanding to another day
- Reaching beyond our walls to give

(6) How has your understanding of compassion, justice, and inclusion developed?

- Through discussions and demonstrations of acceptance
- Connected with people who were proponents of LT concept. Wanted to give, but before LT had few opportunities
- Leap of faith; can do it because it’s proven
- The guests “own” it. The feeling is that it’s “ours,” and it’s getting bigger and better
- Mission work is “out there.” But at St. John’s it’s in here.

(7) What acts of compassion, justice, and inclusion can you see yourself doing here or elsewhere?

- YWCA Family Shelter on Leonard Ave
- Open Shelter
- Church residency or Grant Commons
- Willingness to risk
- Things that nobody likes doing

- Once you participate in LT or food pantry, you never look at people the same way again
- Engaging in the annual homeless “count”

(8) Other comments (communion, preaching, *The Largest Table*, etc)

- Kathy’s sermons are different since doctoral program; they were good before, but now she’s more animated, voice inflection. Nobody knows how much time Kathy spends at her job and how dedicated and committed she is.
- Need to provide other services (telephone, movies, cooking school, “Bagging for change,” gathering room, computers, shower)

Focus Group Data—Jim Norris (Nov 10, 2008)

Age	Gender	Minutes	Length	AgeCommun	LGT?	Frequency?
27	M	10	4 mo	12	N	6
30	F	15	2	5	Y	5
31	F	15	8	12	N	6
44	F	25	144	13	N	6
45	F	10	540	11	Y	2
49	F	10	84	4	Y	5
71	M	50	120	15	Y	1
72	F	60	120	5	Y	1

(1) Word/Phrase Describing Communion

- Affirmation
- Cleansing
- Connection
- Participation
- Community
- Fellowship with God
- Promise
- Rite of passage

(2) What Does “Table Fellowship” Mean?

- Family at table talking and sharing together
- Good memories
- Good relationship
- Deliberate conversation is facilitated while you’re eating; it makes talking easier
- Communicating and getting to know better those who you’re eating with
- Feeding the body and soul
- Community; an act of giving to those you’ve invited to the table
- Giving not receiving

(3) Elements of Table Fellowship and where have seen them?

- Openness to new conversations, especially with those you don’t know very well
- Willing to give and not just receive in a conversation
- Take risks to open yourself up (at *The Largest Table*); make eye contact and smile at them; ask them “how are you?”
- Rich diversity that is non-judgmental

(4) Has your experience of communion changed in past 2 years and how?

- The way we do it (use to pass it; now we go forward); used to be more formal
- Encourages you to look at the other person
- Concerned about the sanitation aspect of intinction, especially on Wednesdays
- Like getting up; feels more participative with my community
- Approaching the altar brings you into the moment
- Would like communion every Sunday OR more meaningful when you don't have it always
- Feels more communal and not as procedural as Catholic service; like the variety here
- No restrictions on having communion at St John's; used to have to be confirmed before taking communion
- "Not because you must, but because you may..."

(5) How have you experienced "The Largest Table Effect"?

- Very conservative white church; very refreshing to see the diversity now that permeates throughout the church
- Everyone is welcome and accepted all the time
- Sharing joys and concerns of ALL types
- Church is not just for the big rituals in life; it's an everyday thing
- The Largest Table is the single biggest thing that has changed the church
- Gotten several new members as a result
- Dinners at Kathy's; "highs" and "lows"
- "You have experienced the Largest Table, even though you've never been to it"
- Wouldn't have come to St. John's if it weren't inclusive and non-judgmental; drawn by the banners on the front
- Brings it back to who Jesus was...non-judgmental

Any barriers still here?

- Money to advertise how wonderful we are
- Non-inclusive language in hymnals

(6) How has your understanding of compassion, justice, and inclusion developed?

- Attending St. John's is a testament of inclusion and helped me to be more inclusive and wanting others to feel that, too
- Good job of balancing different views and still move us forward

- You can tell a lot about a church by the programs it offers. Our focus is “outward” rather than “inward.”
- Food pantry
- Everything builds from *The Largest Table*

(7) What acts of compassion, justice, and inclusion can you see yourself doing here or elsewhere?

- Rubbed off on my daughter who is modeling my actions in how to treat people equally
- Very subtle evangelism through the mission and outreach by acting with compassion and justice to help them in their need
- Want to pass on torch of mission trips and share what we have here with other people and to see differences that church has made in people’s lives around the world
- Some of my experiences here has fueled my thinking about how people can sit down together to solve their problems; great value in small group interactions we take for granted can be really transforming

(8) Other comments (communion, preaching, Largest Table, etc)

- When Kathy speaks she makes you feel as if she is talking directly to you.
- Coming home in a very different way—welcoming and comforting
- I’d like to have the wine back

Focus Group Data—Bob Murden (Nov 12, 2008)

Age	Gender	Minutes	Length	AgeCommun	LGT?	Frequency?
62	F	23	62	12	Y	4
72	M	30	5	12	Y	5
69	F	30	5	11	Y	4
39	F	10	2	12	N	6
59	F	40	25	13	Y	1
58	M	40	25	12	Y	1

(1) Word/Phrase Describing Communion

- Personal
- Connection—one with everyone else
- My connection with God and Christ
- Reflective of my life and what I'm doing at the time
- Peacefulness
- Reflection
- Sharing of Christ's body and blood
- Covenant
- Community
- Togetherness
- Forgiveness of sins

(2) What Does "Table Fellowship" Mean?

- Sitting down and enjoying meals with others in congregation
- Spending time with people in the church
- Table that is set for communion
- Sharing of the table
- Maundy Thursday
- Sharing
- Breaking bread together
- Sit down with family to eat and share
- The whole world flowing with food

(3) Elements of Table Fellowship and where have seen them?

- Communicating with people around you, not just taking the bread and wine
- Food. Putting a lot of love in the preparation, the sharing, the planning.

- Serving communion
  - Acceptance; taking a meal from someone who wants nothing from you
  - Repetition each week of “whoever you are...” [words of affirmation]
  - The Largest Table* and in our potluck lunches
  - Small groups always have food—grapes, cheese spreads
  - In Kathy’s Bible studies
  - Leaven with Seven
- (4) Has your experience of communion changed in past 2 years and how?
- The way we do it (intinction)
  - Personal experience (me and God vs. Us and God)
  - From a Catholic background I still see it as me and God, not Us
  - How I feel about it (more emotion)
  - It goes back to Kathy, the preparer, that gets us ready to have these feelings
- (5) How have you experienced “*The Largest Table Effect*”?
- Work projects—you can see the Spirit there and find out things you didn’t know about people
  - Open Shelter
  - More openness and acceptance because the Largest Table has broken down ignorance
  - Sunday school points out that everybody has their own way of doing things; don’t try to be an evangelist and convert them to your way
  - Food pantry. In a way, you are communing with them and realize “I am so lucky and thankful that I can help somebody else.”
- (6) How has your understanding of compassion, justice, and inclusion developed?
- Through what we have gone through here with ONA
  - Camaraderie while preparing food
  - Include all in all experiences at St. John’s (kids)
  - Addressing and labeling
  - Everybody will be here on Christmas Eve, no matter who they are
- (7) What acts of compassion, justice, and inclusion can you see yourself doing here or elsewhere?
- I look at people differently; I’m more tolerant and less afraid
  - All God’s children, and I feel that deeper than I used to
  - “There’s nothing you can do or nothing you can say...”
  - You are always welcome here and you know Kathy means it

- (8) Other comments (communion, preaching, Largest Table, etc)
- Kathy's sermons are different and a lot more meaningful (stories that bring the meaning into our everyday lives); they are positive and full of hope; I don't fall asleep like with the others. Like reading a good book.
  - Preach more from the floor instead of the pulpit; like she is just one of us sharing a message
  - Communion and the way we do it with us coming in from the back and Dale's singing
  - When Kathy is not here, she makes sure she has someone that will do a wonderful job. That speaks for her sense of self confidence and self worth. She takes the time to get good people in, like when she went to Chicago.
  - In the last five years, there have been more changes than in all the other years. We have totally turned around. Nice to see the growth change also. There used to be more deaths than new members. Now there are a lot of new faces. And downtown churches have twice the difficulty of urban churches. There is much arguing among each other and they have no new people.

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