

The Table of Love

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 16, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 12:28-31](#) and [Romans 13:8-14](#)

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When I was a kid, my mom would let my siblings and me pick what we wanted for dinner on our birthdays. I always picked her spaghetti and meat sauce. The pasta itself was a brand that you can't get here on the west coast, so I don't know how it compares to a favorite brand I can get here. I suspect, however, that the east coast vermicelli of my childhood is pretty similar to the vermicelli I can find at a grocery store here, and what I really liked was my mom's meat sauce. It wasn't like she had a secret recipe: hamburger, tomato paste, some water, and a package of seasoning prepared by some company – I think that was it.

And it was the best. In fact, I loved it so much that I really didn't want to eat spaghetti and meat sauce at my friends' homes because the sauces their moms made just couldn't measure up to the sauce my mom made. The only explanation I've been able to come up with is that perhaps my mom *did* have a secret ingredient – love – because my mom spaghetti and meat sauce sure tasted like love.

Some of you know that I grew up in a large, rambling colonial home in the suburbs of Boston. The house was big enough to have a formal dining room in the front. We used it on special occasions: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. I think that had as much to do with practicality as anything else. Those were the days when grandparents and cousins would gather and there wasn't room around the kitchen table (where my family typically ate) when all those people were gathered.

When I think back to those spaghetti dinners, we're not in the dining room. I see my dad standing at the kitchen table, reaching into the large aluminum pot with tongs, and serving the slippery, buttery, bare noodles onto a plate. He passes the plate to my mom who spoons on the meat sauce out of the frying pan she had made it in, the meat sauce next to the naked noodles for my brother and spooned right on top for my sisters and me.

Jesus, I think, would be more comfortable at the kitchen table than at the dining room table. Nothing against the bigger table with more people gathered, mind you. And nothing against pulling out and using the china plates and silverware my parents received at their wedding. I just think Jesus would have liked my mom's spaghetti sauce.

We can do that with God or with Jesus. We can make them sit on the mahogany chairs at the dining room table. We can push them up onto some heavenly throne and imagine one or both of them demanding worship and throwing down thunderbolts like Zeus. We can do this despite the fact that there's no record of Jesus ever saying, "Worship me." No, what Jesus said was, "Follow me." And he teaches us how to follow him with two commandments: two great commandments: Love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength; and Love your neighbor as yourself.

Father Richard Rohr muses about how we go about loving God. He writes, “Many of us seem to have concluded that we love God by attending church services. For some reason, we think that makes God happy, but I’m not sure why.”¹ I’m reminded of the scene in *The Big Bang Theory* when, set up on a blind coffee date, Sheldon meets Amy.²

I, too, am baffled by the notion of a deity who takes attendance.

Rohr points out, “Jesus never talked about attending services, although church can be a good container to begin with.”³ The problem comes when we let it stop there. This allows us to separate religion from our actual lives.

Rohr says, “The only way I know how to teach anyone to love God, and how I myself seek to love God, is to love what God loves, which is everything and everyone, including you and including me!... Then we love with God’s infinite love that can always flow through us. We’re able to love people and things for themselves and in themselves – and not for what they do for us. That takes both work and surrender. As we get ourselves out of the way, there is a slow but real expansion of consciousness. We’re not the central reference point anymore. We love in greater and greater circles until we can finally do what Jesus did: love and forgive even our enemies.”⁴

I wonder if I’ll ever get there. I get how the two great commandments are connected. Rohr’s explanation makes the practical connection. Jesus saying the second commandment is “like” the first makes the rhetorical connection. Jesus is saying “that it is the same Source and the same Love that allows us to love ourselves, others, and God *at the same time!*”⁵

I get how the two great commandments are connected. I just wonder if I’ll ever really get there. I wonder if I’ll every love God with all of my being – heart, mind, soul, and strength – and my neighbor as myself so fully and continually that I will be able to love the way Jesus loved. And if you wonder like me, here’s a word of encouragement: don’t let that wondering deter you from practicing. Practice doesn’t make perfect; practice makes better.

And the world sure could use a whole lot of “better.” “Imagine how different the world would be if we just obeyed that one commandment—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves,” Rohr writes. “It would be the most mighty political, social upheaval imaginable. The world would be radically different if human beings really treated other people as they would like to be treated. We can take this as a simple rule of thumb: *What would I want from that person right now? What would be helpful for me to receive?* Well, there’s our commandment. There’s our obligation to do to others!

“It’s so simple that we can see why we put all our attention on the Ten Commandments, or the hundreds of other regulations culture and religion place on us. It’s

¹ Richard Rohr, “Commanded to Love,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/commanded-to-love/> (posted and accessed 27 May 2024).

² If YouTube doesn’t block the video, you can see the clip at <https://youtu.be/HUk3KuxIN k>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Richard Rohr, “One Source of Love,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/one-source-of-love/> (posted and accessed 26 May 2024).

much easier to worry about things that keep us ‘pure,’ so to speak, but are of little consequence.”⁶

Rabbi Sharon Brous offers an illustration that I think is on point. “Say you’re walking in downtown LA, or Chicago, or New York. A naked man runs in front of you on the sidewalk, screaming and cursing. What do you do? Most of us, of course, briskly cross the street. *That guy’s unwell*, we think.

“But say you live in a tiny town of maybe fifty households. You’re walking around one day when a naked man runs in front of you on the sidewalk, screaming and cursing. And because you live in a tiny town, you know this man ... it’s Henry. Last week, you just happen to know, there was a terrible tragedy, and fire burned Henry’s house to the ground, leaving him with nothing. What do you do?

“‘Henry,’ you say, ‘come with me, friend. You need a warm meal and a safe place to stay.’

“What does it take to shift our collective consciousness from *stranger who is unwell* to *Henry, my neighbor, created in God’s own image?*...

“The challenge is to imagine a fundamentally different reality: a world in which we recognize and fight for each other’s dignity. A world in which we ... train our hearts to see even the people others might render invisible. A world in which we recognize that we – images of the Divine – are all bound up in the bond of life with one another. And our hardest and holiest work is not to look away.”⁷

The communion table is the table of love. Here, at this table, I receive love. I taste the love in the bread and cup as surely as I tasted the love in my mother’s spaghetti and meat sauce. Here at this table, I am reminded that I am not defined by my mistakes, nor by my “what ifs,” nor by any brokenness of heart. Here at this table, I am reminded that I am defined by Love, and Love always calls me forward. The love I experience here at this table calls me to share it with the world.

This Table of Love requires much of us. It insists that we love one another as we love ourselves, and that we love ourselves as we love others. Love asks that we raise one another up by saying, “Yes, you are worthy! You are welcome at this table. Come and eat!” When we surrender to the mysterious ways of love, there’s a good chance we will be surprised to find just how much love there is to go around.

Amen.

⁶ Richard Rohr, “Loving Large Is Our Life’s Work,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/loving-large-is-our-lifes-work/> (posted and accessed 31 May 2024).

⁷ Sharon Brous, “Knowing Our Neighbors,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/knowning-our-neighbors/> (posted and accessed 28 May 2024).