

A Shared Table (An Addition to A New Trinity)

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on World Communion Sunday
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Last February I presented the image of Shadow Rock and the three campfires. This sermon is on our website under the heading “leadership”. For those who are new among us let me give a summary. The world is a tough place for people. It is like a wilderness and Shadow Rock is a sanctuary refuge in the middle of the wilderness. When people stumble out of the wilderness into our sanctuary clearing they will find three campfires. People can warm their hands and find support at any one of the three campfires. One campfire represents theism. Another represents non-theism, and the third represents atheism. The three fires together represent the diversity and the unity of Shadow Rock. Our acknowledgement and embracing of the three fires and the people that gather around these fires is stating a non-negotiable for us and it is part of our identity. That non-negotiable is stated in the way we begin every celebration of life service; “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

I have made reference to the metaphor many times and I have heard you use it while in conversation with each other. It is an image that has resonated with you and it has helped you with some of your discussions. However, it has some more theological moving parts to it and I want to talk about one of those this morning, specifically, the centrality of the table.

The image includes the idea that people are in this wilderness and they are looking for a place to rest and belong. Central to the sanctuary clearing of Shadow Rock and equal distance from the fires of theism, non-theism, and atheism is a table. It is a table of love and grace where all people are welcomed. This welcome table of love and grace is a centerpiece for identity and vision. Identity is having clarity about who we are. Vision is having clarity about where we are going.

As was read this morning from the letter to the Ephesians, one of the tasks of leadership is to bring out in the open and make plain what God has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all long. When Jesus opened the dinner table to all people he was saying that this open and welcoming practice is a metaphor for what God has intended for all of us all along. The most unwelcomed people in Jesus day found a place at his table.

This simple but profound practice transformed the hearts and minds of those who practiced it as well as those who received such love and affirmation.

This simple but profound practice shook the foundations of his society and the continued welcome table practices of his followers shook the foundations of empire.

This simple and profound practice created a new identity for the people of God as well as a vision for what the world can be.

Given the make up of our congregation I think I must acknowledge that over the centuries the institutional church has imposed layers of mythology and policies of exclusion so that sometimes it has been a source of pain instead of a source of healing and vision. This is a misrepresentation of the original spirit of the table practices of Jesus and I want us to reclaim that which has been taken from us. Just as there was a deep giving of Jesus' self when he practiced the welcome table, so there is a deep giving of ourselves to each other and to the world when we share at this table.

I believe that the centrality of the table and the welcome table practices of Jesus provide a good balance to the three campfires of Shadow Rock. The separate fires speak of our diversity and our respect for everyone's unique place in their journey. The table speaks to our willingness to suspend our differences for the sake of love and therefore speaks to our unity. The hard core Shadow Rock values reflected in the table practices of Jesus are values we can all share regardless of the campfire where we warm our hands.

We can limit our identity and our vision to teams, programs and buildings but I recommend that with both feet firmly planted in love we take in and pour out with all people the extravagant dimensions of love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb its depths! Rise to its heights! Live full lives!

How can we do this? We come to the table with our hearts and minds open to each other and our hands ready to work when we leave the table. In this there is balance. Look and see who is not at the welcome table. Where are the hungry, the naked, the tired, the poor, the immigrant, the prisoner, and the sick? We know where they are. They are not so safely tucked away in our institutions and in the ruined places of our cities so we do not have to tolerate them at the nice, clean and safe tables of our lives.

Today is World Communion Sunday. We join people all around the world in affirming that in the ongoing table practices of Jesus we are challenged in our complacency and lives are changed. We join people all around the world that the table of Jesus is a metaphor for a renewed world.

On this day we have the joy of welcoming people into our fellowship. They have felt welcome around our table and so we make official what is already a reality. To drive home the point about promoting an open table and making a place at the table for all people we have put our new friends' membership certificate information on a placemat. Imagine a table overflowing and a placemat at that table for every person. This is a vision for a better world and a vision worthy of our best efforts.