



# Preparing to Gather at the Table

## A Two Session Bible Study

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### 1. Reviewing the Significance of the Table

As Disciples, the Table is at the center of our identity. As Stephanie Paulsell and Belva Brown Jordan write, the Table:

*...is where the brokenness and pain of the world is made visible, and this is where we rekindle our hope, week after week. This is where our bodies are shaped for service and solidarity. This is where we learn to make room for others... This is where we can see each other as we really are, as children of the living God, made in God's image. This is where we learn to risk living within God's economy, where all God's children eat together and there is enough for all.<sup>1</sup>*

While we think of the Table in symbolic ways, it undoubtedly calls us us into embodied, physical, and transformative community. With the real, physical threat facing our immigrant neighbors, the Table invites us to remember how Jesus disrupted social expectation by breaking bread with people others said should not be at the Table. We remember that to be a Table church we have to be a justice church. Table work must be more than spiritual nourishment, but a commitment to being in authentic, intimate, and honest relationship with our neighbors that are vulnerable and hurting. In doing so, we create a Table space that makes room for the process of God's transformative love to change ourselves and the world.

#### Questions for Discussion:

- \*How do we prepare ourselves to gather around tables together? What does being around a table evoke for you?
- \*What stories and memories shape your understanding of what gathering around a table means?
- \*What does it mean to authentically listen? To be vulnerable? To be open to hearing each other's stories?
- \*What are the biblical "table stories" that are significant to your faith?

#### Study and Reflect on This "Border Picnic" Image:

Read the story of how French street artist JR (@JRArt) built a massive "picnic table" centered around a "tablecloth" image of eyes of a dreamer, and located on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border at Tecate: <https://qz.com/1098850/french-street-artist-jr-is-trolling-trump-with-installations-that-straddle-the-us-mexico-border/>.

- \*What elements do you see in the picture, and what feelings does it evoke in you?
- \*How does it inspire you to build tables that unify populations in your community?



#### Share These Thoughts on the Purposes and Theology of the Table:

Serene Jones: *"When I come to the communion table...I think about Jesus' very unnatural death; how his body was brutally tortured, broken, and destroyed by the religious authorities of his day. And when I remember this, my feelings at communion are of deep grief for the ways our bodies continue to be broken by people with power...The pain of the Table wakes me up to the pain of the world."*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Belva Brown Jordan and Stephanie A. Paulsell, "The Lord's Supper," in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007) 159.

<sup>2</sup> *Setting the Table: Women in Theological Conversation*, ed. Rita Nakashima Brock, Claudia Camp, and Serene Jones (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006) 253.

Sallie McFague: “*Sin for privileged people is taking more than our share....sin is a rejection of Jesus’ parable of the feast, in which all are invited to the table, regardless of who they are.*”<sup>3</sup>

Belva Brown Jordan and Stephanie Paulsell: “*Reading the gospels, it is impossible not to notice that whenever Jesus sits down to eat, he often does so with people others say should not be at the table - tax collectors, sinners - and he welcomes the woman who weeps over his feet at dinner and dries them with her hair. Jesus scandalizes others by sitting down to eat with the unwelcome. If we are to encounter Jesus at our communion tables, we must set tables from which no one is turned away.*”<sup>4</sup>

\*What is it about food and sharing that seems to allow us to be so much more open to one another?

\*How does power function at tables?

## 2. Remembering Biblical “Table Stories”

**Re-familiarize yourself with each of the following “table stories”:**

Acts 27:33-38 – Breaking Bread in the Storm

Luke 24:13-35 – The Road to Emmaus

Matthew 14:13-21- Feeding of the 5000

Luke 14:1-24 – Jesus at a Pharisee’s House

Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:17-25, Luke 22:7-23, John 13:1-30 – The Last Supper (and Foot Washing)

**Consider this reflection of Acts 27:33-38, and discuss how you might describe the other “table stories”:**

Here Paul is on a ship, lost at sea in the middle of storm, with passengers who had not eaten for fourteen days. The possibility of living seems bleak, yet in the midst of this chaos is the action of Paul taking a loaf of bread, blessing it, and giving it to all aboard the ship. In reading this text, the Eucharistic imagery is notable, but the universal language is remarkable. It does not matter that the other passengers are prisoners of the Roman Empire, nor does it matter whether or not these people are followers of Jesus. With death as a legitimate reality, the passengers on this ship instead choose to break bread with one another, not considering the qualifications or worthiness of the participants, but instead taking a physical, embodied action to live together.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

\*What images and thoughts do these stories evoke for you?

\*Who do you notice as present in these stories? Who is *not* present, but should be? Do we notice at our own table: who is there and who is not, but should be?

\*Reflect on Luke 24:35, “Then they told what happened on the road, and how he had been known to them in the breaking of bread.” How do we recognize Jesus in breaking bread together? Where do we experience the presence of God most fully?

\*What stands out about the setting of these stories? What does the context of place convey? How do these stories challenge our own table practices?

\*What do these stories tell us about community, hospitality, and fellowship, and about what our relationships with one another could look like?

\*How do we think about hospitality, mercy, and justice? What do these stories demonstrate about what it means to have compassion?

\*How might our own lives and our communities be transformed around a table? Following our studies, how might we create spaces where people are further invited, affirmed, heard, and validated?

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<sup>3</sup> Sallie McFague, “Sin, Evil, and Economics,” in *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, ed. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005) 150.

<sup>4</sup> Belva Brown Jordan and Stephanie A. Paulsell, “The Lord’s Supper,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007) 157.