

February 10, 2016  
Luke 22:1-13

Ash Wednesday  
A Place at The Table for You

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.*

In Churches across America, people have their places. One individual was Caroline. She was a woman who had her place. In her church, people knew. It was right there, on the right hand side of the church, near the first stained glass window, closest to the side aisle. That was where Caroline worshiped and that, to Caroline, was her place. Her pastor learned this one day as he was bringing her communion. You see, Caroline, was no longer in church as often as before. She was unable to leave her home without difficulty, and the pastor had started bringing her Communion once a month. One day, after the service, she finally raised the subject. "Pastor, has anyone begun to sit in my place?" He was surprised at how tenderly she raised the issue. It was as if she was embarrassed to ask and yet also afraid of the answer he might give. What to him was simply a seat in church, to Caroline it was very important. It was her place; her place of worship, her place of prayer, her place among God's people. And so, she was afraid of the answer. You see, other people had begun to sit in her place, people who didn't think she would make it bad and in the future, people who wouldn't know her at all. For Caroline, sitting there in her home, knowing she would not be coming back to church this year, it was very important that she still have a place.

I'm sure you've felt Caroline's fear – the fear of losing your place. It happens to all of us. We are certain about our job, our place on the team, our role in someone's life, and then things suddenly change and we find out that someone else has come and filled our position, done our work, and we've lost our place. You used to be the star of the team. Then someone comes in and dominates and takes your place. You watch the new player and there's a feeling in the pit of your stomach that you haven't felt since you walked onto the field, rink, or court for the first time. You begin to wonder if you lost your place.

You used to be the one who knew everything at your job. Then technology changes...your boss, your company brings someone young and energetic in that knows the technology and you find out that people are going to that person. You've begun to lose your place, and you begin to wonder how long you'll be needed around here. You survey the workforce, do some mental downsizing and suddenly, in the pit of your stomach, there's a fear that you haven't felt since you first went interviewing for a job. You begin to wonder if you've lost your place.

If you've ever felt that fear, then you have an inkling of what was going on in our Gospel lesson for tonight. Luke tells us that "the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near." This was the Passover, and yet it was filled with an unholy fear. Luke says that "the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put Him to death, for they feared the people". Feared the people? That's a strange thing to say about these men. After all, they were the ones who confidently took their places among people. They loved the most important seats in the synagogue and the greetings in the market places. They were experts in the law, able to make a person break under its burden in a single word. They wore the long tassels. They gave a tenth of their possessions. They fasted twice a week. They could stand in the center of the synagogue and thank God they weren't like other people. They had wisdom and power and the respect of the people...until Jesus came. His ministry attracted crowds. His words touched hearts. His hands opened eyes, and His words and hands were everywhere. His very presence brought about a life that they had never known and a gratitude that they could only describe as divine. And with His words, and His work among the people, they had begun to lose their place. And so they

gather on this day and prepare for His death. While everyone around them is preparing for Passover, they are afraid; and in that fear, they prepare for Jesus' death.

I don't know if you notice the irony here. Luke tells us that the Feast of Passover was approaching, and then only the preparation for the feast that he reveals is fear and conspiracy and intended murder. He takes us into the lives of the religious leaders of the community and reveals their sin. When the leaders of God's people spend their time plotting death before the Passover, one can wonder what lies at the heart of their religion. It shouldn't surprise us that Luke talks about the foe. This is certainly Satan's realm: religion on the outside but corruption within. Where there is fear, there is likely to be the foe. Satan enters Judas, and Judas discusses how he might betray Jesus. Not only is there the foe, but there is also the use of force. Luke tells us that when Judas comes to visit the religious leaders, he finds them with "the chief priests and officers." If you can't secure your position by your work among the people, you can at least protect your position by force. Not only is there force, but Luke also points to finances. Upon hearing of Judas's offer of betrayal, "they were glad and agreed to give him money." So we have fear, we have force, we have finances, and we have the foe. A deadly combination. IT brings about death in the life of faith. It did then, and it down now.

You used to be the pride of your child. After hockey practice (or fill in the sport), your child came running to meet you at the car, and the ride home was filled with talk about the game, questions of your opinion, and security in your words. That was only a year ago, but today it has all changed. Now, you're lucky if you're needed to pick him up. He usually tries to get a ride home with his friends. And when he runs to the car, it's so that you can get out of there quickly as possible so no one will see him with you. And the ride home...well, that's filled with apprehensive questions—it's so hard to sound casual—and his one-word answers and your mutual silence as he looks out the window and you wonder where things went wrong. You experience this and you realize you've begun to lose your place. His friends and his desire to be free have taken your place as a parent. When you begin to fear what is happening, you also realize how easy it is to turn to force. You begin to demand that you pick your child up from practices. Where there is force, finances are sure to follow. Who pays for his equipment? If you pay for the equipment, he better realize you have the right to know what happened at the game. Force and finance and deep down, further down than any of us can notice, lies the foe. Stirring up your anger. Churning your fear. Working in the lives of you and your child to bring about anger and separation and reasons to rebel. Honor of one's parent. Love of one's child. These holy things are torn apart by the work of the foe.

Luke, however points out that in the face of all this, in the face of fear, force, finances, and the power of the foe, there is one other factor: God. God, who prepares a place for His people at Passover. God is still at work in this story, and His work is really so simple that if you don't read closely, you may miss it altogether. Luke writes: "Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, 'Go and prepare the Passover Lamb for us, that we may eat it.' ... They went and found it just as He had told them, and they prepared the Passover". Jesus speaks, and a place is prepared. He offers a strange depiction of circumstance—a man carrying a water jar, a journey through the city, a furnished Upper Room. His disciples go and find that it is exactly as Jesus says. In the middle of all of this, God is still at work. What is God doing? He is praying a place for His people. That is what the Passover is, after all, the place where God comes and rescues His people. The place where God declares that He and He alone is at work to set His people free.

God's people have gone far away from Him, but Passover still draws near. Love has turned into fear. Fear has turned into action. Service has turned into force and offerings into bribes. And still, Passover draws near. Regardless of what His people are doing, God continues to do His

work. It is His work, after all, that sets people free. Free from the fear of slavery in Egypt, free from the force of Pharaoh, free from sin, and free from suffering – God alone again and again sets His people free. From Egypt, From Babylon, From Sin. Through God's action, His people are brought out of their sin into salvation. And year after year, decade after decade, God's people celebrate God's simple yet profound work.

Tonight, we gather at the beginning of another Lenten season. Once again, Passover draws near. And this year, among us, there are those who lost their places. Relationships have changed, children have grown, spots on the team have been lost or changed, jobs have been lost or become less secure, and those who were once close seem far away. And in the midst of all this change, we might get the sinking feeling, that fear in the pit of our stomach, wondering how we will survive, how we will manage. For those of you who gather, these weeks of Lent come to point out to you that one thing does not change. Passover draws near and God once again does His work of freeing and forgiving love. God once again prepares a place for you.

This Lent, we will gather for a season to reflect on the places of the Passion. We will read through the entire Passion account as told by Luke, a small portion each week, and you won't be surprised at the story.

You've heard it before. It's a simple story. You've been to those places before. The Upper Room, the Garden of Gethsemane, the halls of Pontius Pilate, the hill of Golgotha—these are the places we remember when we meditate on our Lord's Passion. Yet when Jesus enters a place, He never leaves it as He finds it. The most troubling places in our lives become the most amazing places of God's grace when Jesus visits them.

Peter will still be Peter, denying Jesus in the courtyard. Pilate will still be Pilate, struggling in his judgment hall. And the crowds will still be the crowds calling for Jesus' death outside the palace. But don't be put off by these Places of the Passion, for in the midst of this story, there is a wonderful, powerful love. We will see tonight and every night that no matter where we are in our lives, God is still coming and claiming us as His children. God is still coming, preparing a place for us in His kingdom.

In a way, God is very much like a Parent who realizes that His children have left Him, strayed far from home, though they live there every day. While he can't control the fact that his son gets rides home from friends after practice, while he can't control the fact that his daughter puts on her headphones and listens to music rather than the voice of her father, while he can't control the fact that his children shut themselves up in their rooms rather than sit with the family, he can control how many places he sets at the table. And as long as He is the father and as long as this is His household, there will be a place for his children...always, there at his table....a place for you.

So tonight, we begin, our Lenten observance with a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Tonight, God comes and brings with Him a feast that always has a place for you. HIS suffering, His death, His resurrection had a purpose. There is no reason for you to fear, for your sins are forgiven, your life is no longer your own, and tonight there is a place set at God's table for you. A simple meal, a simple story, and simple remembrance, but what a wonderful work God has done and is doing for His people this year.

You know, if Caroline was still alive, that Pastor could answer her question. No, she no longer has that place in the pew. The right-hand side of the church, by the first stained-glass window, closest to the side aisle? That place has other people sitting there. But she does have a place

at God's table. Jesus has prepared a place for her. So when Caroline couldn't come to church anymore and felt like she was losing her place, well, Jesus decided to bring the Church to her. There they sat, Caroline, her pastor, her Lord—at the Table, and there our Lord assured her that nothing in this world could take His place away from Her. NO need for fear, not on this day. When Jesus is the Lord of the Table, the subject of your Lenten contemplation, there is always a place for you.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus your Lord and Savior, your Lenten King. Amen.*