

**Expanding the Table
Matthew 22: 36-40**

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At my home, I have a beautiful farmhouse table that serves as our dining table. I saw it at an antique store on the parkway a few years ago. It was \$300, which was above my price range at the time. I kept going back to the store in hopes that the price would drop. A few months later I walked into the store and he had dropped the price to \$250. I thought I would take a shot and make an offer. I offered \$200 but my offer was rejected. Over that next year I would return from time to time to the store. It sat there and dropped to \$200 and then to \$175. After a year, I walked back in and offered \$150 and my offer was accepted.

The table has made a beautiful addition to our home and it can seat 8 people at a time. At this table, over 20 foster children have come through my home and eaten a meal at this table. This table has hosted our Weatherly children for milk and cookies each year. Our youth and college students have shared many meals around this table. This table has played host for several church committee dinners and meetings. This table has been a gathering place for my family and friends as we gather together for parties and lunches. I love this table because it is a symbol in our home that all are welcome, regardless of where you come from or who you are. We all come from different walks of life, but we find commonality around the table together.

Many of you have gathered together over the holidays around a table. You have shared many meals and good conversation with friends and family. Take a moment to consider those whom you gathered with. Friends? Family? Those you shared common interests with? Those with different opinions? We live in a divisive world that is too often teaching us to stand our ground and hold true to our convictions. Maybe even seeking out the battles and arguments. I have been contemplating this idea of expanding the table. Expanding our table. What does that look like in our own lives?

Our text this morning is familiar one. It is one I love for many reasons. There are lots of ways we can get hung up on our ability to love, to show grace and mercy to one another. Let me love others Lord, but don't let it come with too great a sacrifice. I want to love this person Lord, but they have hurt me so much. I want to seek grace and mercy in this situation Lord but I have been burned one too many times. I won't be taken for a fool again. The command to love your neighbor as yourself cuts through every one of those excuses.

My thought for us this morning is simple. We are called to expand our table. It is very easy for us to surround ourselves with those who we like, those who we get along with or those who we share common interests. It is more difficult to reach out to those on the "other side" or to those who are uncomfortable for us to associate with. But the command to love your neighbor as yourself is without condition.

Expanding the table requires sacrifice and a step out of comfort zone. Loving others requires us to go to difficult and uncomfortable places. Loving others sometimes requires us to take risks - to think differently, to see differently. As we gather together for worship, you have certain expectations for this time of worship. You expect to see David, Handy and myself here in

worship. Two are out, but it's not uncommon. You have heard me preach before and Daryl most ably has lead our choir. What you did not expect and were not prepared for is for me to deliver the sermon, not from the pulpit but from a different place in our worship space. Furthermore, you were not prepared for me to be dressed as I am before you, not in a robe, but a more casual attire. For some of you, this is a surprise, but some of you have come to terms with this for today's service. I imagine there are some that are a bit uncomfortable with this. In your mind, this is not what we should expect as we enter into worship. It has become a distraction for you. It has become uncomfortable. To expand our table requires times where we may feel uncomfortable or out of our element. It requires us to take what we have come to know and expect and turn it upside down or change it. It requires us to be open to new possibilities and ideas.

Expanding the table means that we don't have to change our position on what we believe. We don't have to change our views on same sex marriage. We don't have to change our political or social views to welcome others to our table. When we focus less on trying to change someone else beliefs or hardening down on our own then we open ourselves up to the opportunities to focus on something greater. We are able to put our common bond in Christ above all else. Expanding the table requires us to put our common bond in Christ above all else. A few years ago, when we went through that season of life in our church, Dr. Freeman kept using the phrase, "Our tent is enough for others." I loved that thought and it has stuck in my mind to this day. Is our tent big enough to be inclusive of all? Is our table long enough to welcome all?

To answer this question, we must answer this one: What does it look like in our own lives to expand our table.

To welcome someone regardless of their political affiliation.
To welcome someone regardless of their sexual orientation.
To welcome someone regardless of their legal status.
To welcome someone regardless of their race.
To welcome someone closest to us who has hurt us.
To welcome those we consider our enemies.

To do this means we must put our own positions aside, to consider the "other side", and to welcome with a warm embrace as Christ does. We don't have to change from Republican to Democrat. We don't have to affirm same sex marriage. We can expand our table without changing what we believe about immigration and abortion. Why is it that we are quick to offer mercy and grace to a total stranger, but to those closest to us, who have hurt us deeply, they are the last to be forgiven?

Let me read our text for us one more time. *Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets.* Before we seek to expand our table, we must ask ourselves, are we loving the Lord our God with all our heart? We must also ask how we love ourselves. Do we have a healthy view of how God sees and loves us?

How big is your table? How many seats does your table hold? Is there more room at your table? Is your table inclusive and diverse? One of the books I have been reading is by John Pavlovitz, entitled *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*. A must read for all. Here these thoughts from John:

“One of the biggest, most damaging mistakes too many Christians so willingly make is assuming that God is as much of a judgmental jerk as we are. But what if we could make room for difference and space for disagreement in our spiritual communities? What if we could give permission for moral failure and freedom to not be certain, and the chance to gloriously fail without needing those things to become black marks against people or death-penalty offenses? What if we made space for people who are as messed up as we are?” Let us focus on making our circle bigger, not smaller. Let us be inclusive and not exclusive. Let us love our neighbor as we love ourselves, without condition. Let us love those different from us just as we love those closest to us. May we come to realize that there is room at our table. May we seek a diverse table that inclusive for all. May Your love for us be enough. Amen.