

Over the weeks of summer, I am going to be talking about symbols of faith. Symbols that lift up or shine on some aspect of our faith tradition. Some symbols will do ancient and some will be right in front of us now. Last time I shared a reflection on a 1st Century symbol that was etched on the stone streets of Ephesus and Athens, on the monastic walls of 3rd Century Syria and Egypt - the “Ichthys” circle. It’s a spoked wheel that cryptically contains the name of Jesus and that communicates the Great Commandment to love God and others.

Today another symbol of faith.

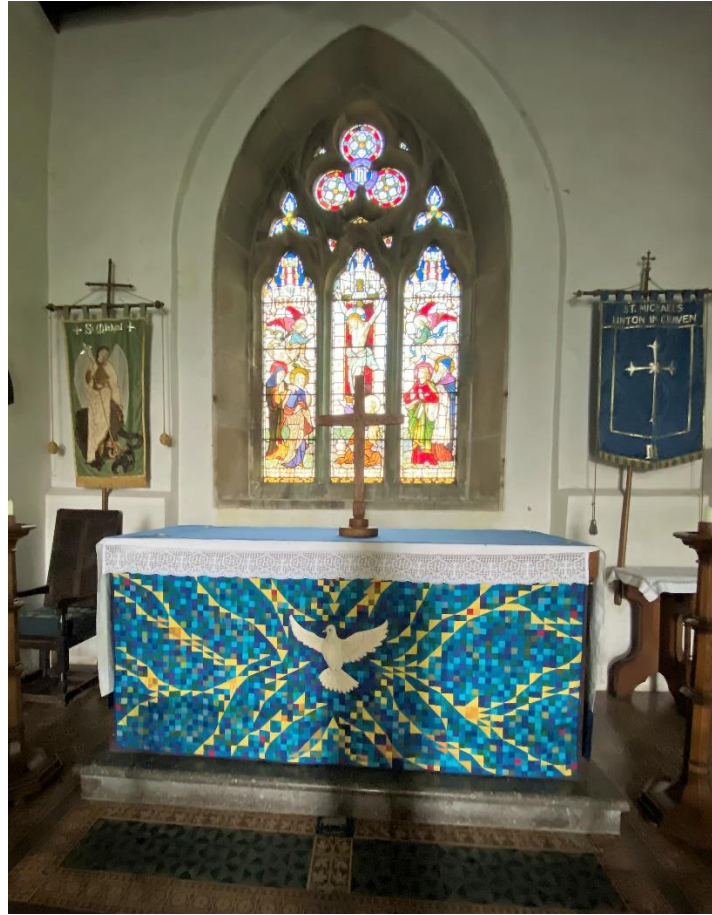
On the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee near the village of Capernaum there is a small church called the Church of the Primacy of St Peter. Inside is the Mensa Christi or Christ’s table.



In the Gospel narratives, in the days after Easter, Jesus gathers with friends around a table and breaks bread. In an Upper Room in Jerusalem, in the village of Emmaus, and in Galilee beside the sea, the resurrected Jesus shares a meal with his friends and followers. In numerous stories it is in gathering around a table that Christ is made known. In the Easter story, a table is often a place of holy encounter.

Sermon Series- Symbols – #2 The Table Text Isaiah 25:6-9 Luke 24:13-32 July 10, 2022
Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church Ottawa, ON

The Mensa Christi by the seashore in Galilee is unusual. Christ's table there is a great sprawling stone, a flat rocky expanse on a sandy beach. It is the traditional location of Jesus breakfast on the beach from John 21. And to preserve the stone, to keep Christ's table safe from the elements over centuries, a church is built over the Mensa Christi.



When you think about it, Christian sanctuaries are often like the church on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We often build churches over tables.

In many traditions, churches have a table in a prominent location. A table is often front and center in the place where Christians gather. The table may be a High Cathedral Altar or a simple wooden board. It may be ornate or plain. It may be towering or low.

But our tables are special. Holy. Symbolic in the sense that they are more than just a piece of furniture – our tables holds meaning.

And you can tell that a sanctuary table is special.



In some churches the table is set apart. The table may be surrounded by an altar rail or placed on a higher platform. In medieval churches there might be a physical barrier that fences the table off from the rest of the sacred space. A “rood screen” might serve as a reminder that the table is special or holy. Practically, a screen or rail separated the holiest part of the church from the places where secular meetings and events might be held,



Even in our sanctuary the communion table is given a special place, in the chancel, on a platform – a reminder that it’s more than just furniture.

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Another sign that a church table is special and symbolic is found in the fact that historically we fight over who gets to be at the table. Our table is an open one. Our rainbow candle on the table is a reminder of inclusivity and wide welcome.



In other times and places the table welcomes only the elite, the chosen...This table is found in a Presbyterian church on the Scottish Ulist Islands. It has a literal fence built around it. And the gates that lead to the table are locked. Clearly this table is not for everyone. You have to merit being at this table.



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The table, in our tradition, is a sacred thing because tables were sacred places in the tradition of Scripture. They were places of hospitality, welcome and reconciliation.

In the Hebrew tradition, to sit at a table with someone was a sign of profound acceptance. Jesus sat at table and broke bread with all kinds of people, drawing criticism while demonstrating the radical hospitality of the Kingdom of God.

Tables could be places of reconciliation. Think of the 23rd Psalm: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows...*

Or hear the words of Martin Luther King Jr: *I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.*

In the Biblical tradition tables were places of acceptance and hospitality and tables are still places of welcome and community. We gather as families, as communities around our dinner tables. We share food at tables as we mark times of significance or celebration.



In *Family and Marriage Therapy* circles there is an exercise called table mapping. People are encouraged to picture the family table, the dinner table in their family of origin. This is done to help people to think about and talk about their families and the people and values that have shaped them. It's a way of getting in touch with who you are and how you came to be the person that you are...

When I think about my own family of origin I can picture our family dinner table, my parents and brother and sister and me. And, over the years the picture changes. For a period of my life I picture a 6th person at the table, my grandfather; my father's father lived with us for many years and so he often had a place at the table. And then as the youngest person in my family, there came a time when first my brother and then my sister gave up their regular place at the table. We went down to four and then three regularly occupied chairs.

Or I can think of the times I sat at my maternal grandparents table, with my grandparents and my great aunt and all sorts of good, formative memories come to mind. When the whole family

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came for dinner, aunts and uncles and cousins, there were many tables in their farm house dining room, with about 50 people seated together.

We can each of us think about the family table that we grew up with or the table that we sit at now. Remembering who sat with us over the years can be a good exercise in remembering the people and times of our lives.



We can also think of who has shared at Christ's table with us over time. On a recent trip to England we visited two churches where Charlotte Bronte would have been present at the table on a Sunday morning. She grew up in the parsonage of the St Michael and All angels Parish in Howorth, and she served as a governess to a family that attended St Andrews Kildwick. In old churches, and St Andrews dates from the 700s, you get a real sense of being connected to the past and its people. We share community, we share a table that extends beyond this time and place.

Table can be places of exclusion or inclusion. When I was a teenager, United Church tables were more exclusive; you had to be confirmed to take communion. Confirmation classes were a ticket to the table.

When I think of inclusive table experiences I recall times when I have shared a meal in a monastic community. In the Benedictine tradition meals are often shared in silence. One of the sisters or brothers reads as the community eats. It's not an oppressive or enforced silence in their tradition. As they practice eating in silence, it is an inclusive and hospitable quiet. No one is left out of the conversation. Everyone is made welcome in the shared stillness.



Take a moment to reflect on the image of a table... Has a table been a place of significant meeting, of shared joy and celebration? Of welcome? Has a table been a place of holy encounter? Do you remember important people who once sat at your family table? At the church's table?

And in the end, there is a table. Think of the Messianic banquet, the great gathering of Creation when this age comes to its end. Remember the Psalmists table in God's house where our cups overflow. In Isaiah 25 the prophet pictures a great feast at the end of all things where God is our host and God serves the best food and the finest wine and there is joy and reunion. Every tear will be wiped away.

The 1984 film, "Places of the Heart" won a best actress Oscar for its lead Sally Field. It's a film set in depression era rural Texas and it is filled with Biblical themes. The central characters are a widow and a blind man and an outsider – very Biblical figures who share their struggles together. There is violence and racism, and injustice and redemption and grace. And in the last scene, everyone is gathered in a little Texas church for Communion: both the living and the dead are there. As communion is shared in the film's final scene, as bread and cup are passed through the pews, we see that a man who got murdered, years earlier is there, and the man who murdered him is there as well. They are all there, caught up in the mystery of the grace of God. It is a beautiful depiction of the "Communion of the Saints," of those gathered around Christ's table, in every time and place. Amen