

Come to the Table of Yearning  
A sermon preached by Rev. W. Dale Osborne on February 21, 2010  
Lectionary Texts: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

Let me begin today's sermon for the first Sunday of Lent by encouraging you to look around you at the new artwork that has been carefully placed on the walls of our sanctuary. Do you notice the theme of the artwork that has been lifted up so well? Simply put, you are looking at various artistic interpretations of what Christians call The Last Supper. The paintings you see are from many continents of our world. The artists who rendered them represent many different cultures but they all share insight into a specific event in the history of what we now call the Christian religion. Much appreciation is due to the Binkley Fine Arts Committee for lovingly adorning our sanctuary and narthex with these powerful images. They have also taken the time to research and catalogue the works of art with written descriptions alongside the paintings. I challenge all of us to accept a simple Lenten Discipline in relationship to this fine display. The challenge is simple and splendidly edifying but it will require discipline. Between now and Good Friday, I challenge all of us to gaze fully at each piece of art. Further, I challenge you to read silently or aloud the descriptions accompanying each piece of art. Finally, I challenge us to imagine ourselves into the scene. Allow yourself to gently connect with the scene of the Last Supper as it is depicted by the artist. Consider how you might have felt and experienced had you been at table with all who had gathered for that particularly unique Passover meal. You have roughly forty days to fulfill this challenge if you choose to accept it. You may have already chosen a Lenten promise or discipline for this year. If so, simply consider my challenge an art project with possible spiritual rewards. Thank you so very much for this labor of love, members of the Fine Arts Committee. We all have a chance for growth because of your generosity.

Now let me draw your attention away from the sanctuary walls for a moment as I ask that you take a look at the central point of this sanctuary. Our chairs are roughly in a round shape during Lent and this allows us to not only look at a central point in the room but also to get glimpses of the people who are worshipping with us. For some, this reshaping of our worship space is unnerving and it throws them off kilter. For others, it provides them with a chance to take a risk and sit in a different part of the worship space. It gives me as a minister, a chance to see all of you in a different perspective. You are no longer merely focused on the person in the pulpit, but your gazes are also naturally drawn visually to the other people who have gathered here to sing, pray and worship together. And what do we find at the central point in our worship space? We find a lovely round wooden table. The strong table is adorned with the color of our liturgical season and flowers given to honor a saint from our congregation's past. We observe also a large Bible which rests open on the tabletop surface with a passage marked by our beautiful rainbow stole. Two white candles, enflamed by our faithful acolytes bring light and warmth to the table. On the table also sits the symbols of Jesus' last supper celebrated roughly 2000 years ago. The pitcher for pouring the wine or water, the chalice for lifting to drink and the plate for passing the bread are all reminders to us of the meal that changed the way we Christians think about God's covenant with humanity. These are all essential parts of our worship experience and of our faith's history. During this reconfiguration of our sanctuary space, you have the opportunity to ponder these objects as you gaze not only at them but also at the people across the sanctuary table who are in return gazing at you. Please look kindly at the new faces you may encounter across our worship space. They are people, very much like you, who have significant hopes, dreams, passions and pitfalls. They are people, very much like you, who struggle to find the right words to say and who yearn for a seat at the table. They are people, very much like you, who long for solace and security. They are your brothers and your sisters in Christ who pass the peace with you Sunday after Sunday. There is a good chance that they love you. I hope keeping these ideas in mind might make it more comfortable to gaze across the table into the eyes of your fellow worshippers. Many apologies to the choir who continue to have nearly the same view they experience during the rest of the church year. The back of my robe is indeed not the most pleasant of sanctuary sights. Our reconfiguration has certain practical imperfections, but that is true of nearly every human endeavor.

My Lenten sermon is entitled "Come to the Table of Yearning". This may be an invitation that strikes some of you as off-putting. After all, who wants to find a new place to yearn? Who wants to yearn at all? Merriam

Webster defines “yearning” as a noun meaning “a tender or urgent longing”. Therefore, we can imagine that some type of dissatisfaction may cause “yearning” to occur. Yearning, a tender or urgent longing – for what or for whom are you yearning? Think about that for a moment. What am I yearning for? What am I yearning for in my family life? What am I yearning for in my academic life? What am I yearning for in my home life? What am I yearning for in my church life? What am I yearning for in my professional life? What am I yearning for in my relationships or am I yearning to simply be in a relationship? What are you yearning for? During these forty days of Lent, we as Christians are encouraged to spend more time in the disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We might benefit by using some of these forty days to determine what we are yearning for on a deeply personal level.

Jesus, as recorded in Luke’s gospel reading from earlier this morning, spent forty days in a desert place in order to pray and to fast. I believe he was also led to that place by the Spirit of God that dwelled within him because he yearned to know how his calling to prophetic ministry might be fulfilled. He was yearning to be prepared for the tremendous journey that lay ahead of him. Little did he know at that time that his yearning would lead him three years later on a journey to a new and prophetic Passover meal in Jerusalem. His yearning would lead him to encounters with unlucky fishermen, faithful women, hungry followers, lame citizens, withered fig trees, embattled prostitutes, wealthy tax collectors, and lawyers in need of further education. Jesus’ yearning did eventually take him to that Passover table. It was for Jesus and it is for us today a table of great invitation.

You are invited to Come to the Table of Yearning so that your life’s journey might be better understood. You may pray at the table, you may eat at the table and you may fast at the table. You may at times come to the table of yearning in order to give something away. There may be a million people at the table with you or you may feel like you are at the table alone. You may encounter your version of the devil at the table of yearning just as Jesus encountered the Tempter after his forty days of fasting and prayer. None of us are immune from temptations in life. None of us are immune from hunger, poverty, illness and addiction. Yet we are all invited to Come to the Table of Yearning. I refer to it as the table of yearning not only because all of us may yearn for certain things in our lives. I refer to it also as the table of yearning because I believe that God is always present at the table. God is yearning for us to be welcomed and connected to the table. God is yearning. God is yearning. God is tenderly longing for each and every one of us to feel welcomed and accepted at the table. During this season of Lent, may each of us spend time in focus at the Table of Yearning. Imagine yourself at the table as you observe carefully and prayerfully the artwork that surrounds us during these forty days and nights of Lent.