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The Table is Turned

On Friday morning I watched the video feed of world leaders gather around an ornate table in Germany at the G-20 meeting. Those invited to attend were representatives of the world's major economies and the largest populations. The ceremonial photo was a glimpse into world power: presidents and prime ministers. One could see them glad-hand one another -- backslapping, primping and preening for the cameras.

The images got me thinking of what it must be like to sit around a table of such global importance. 2/3rds of the world's population: 80% of the world's economies. Of course each of the leaders comes to that table to represent their own nation's best interests -- to think otherwise would be naïve. But, for a moment, imagine what could be done in the world with commitment and buy-in from those gathered: ending some of conflicts and wars, lifting people out of poverty, sharing wealth and resources, responding collectively to our planet's changing climate. The simple aim of a greater good for humanity.

I come back to the large table. Usually when we talk about having a 'seat at the table,' we are using language that confers or assumes power and voice. Protesters clamor to have a seat at the table. Corporate boards determine the future of companies around an often varnished conference table. Unions advocate for their members come to the table to negotiate. Even parish churches, when our vestry meets, we gather as elected members around simple folding tables to shape the vision and manage the affairs of this community of faith.

Since we first started using the Iona Community Eucharist last Sunday, I have been quite taken by the different images and fresh language. I do like the traditional prayers in our Book of Common Prayer -- they offer comfort and familiarity that allows one to pray by heart and memory. But the use of new and different prayers on occasion allows me to sit up and listen in other ways.

The prayers that are used at the Eucharist have a pattern and purpose. They speak of God and the world God has made. They speak to God's plan for us, often reminding us of people and history and beginning -- Abraham, the Exodus, prophets, and humanity's rebellious ways. And always the call us to return.

The prayers then turn to Jesus, because the meal we share each Sunday is the meal he became present to his friends. We hear the words that he once said: "This is my body. Drink this cup. Do this to remember me." In whatever form or version, the essence of the words never change.

Iona's liturgy offers us a descriptive summary of the way Jesus lived: *his compassion, his clear speaking, his disturbing presence, his innocent suffering, his fearless dying, his rising to life breathing forgiveness.*

And then we hear this:

Jesus was always the guest. At the meal tables of the wealthy where he pled the case of the poor, he was always the guest. Upsetting polite company, befriending isolated people, welcoming the stranger, he was always the guest.

The words sound like a sermon and message more than a prayer – and maybe that is the point.

But here, at this table, he is the host.

You and I arrive not at a table of world leaders, or a negotiating table, we come to a table with other expectations and demands.

First: the dual nature of service: *those who wish to serve him must first be served by him. Those who want to follow him must first be fed by him.*

Before we can even think of going out into the world to do God's work, we come to this table, this altar, to be fed. And to be fed implies need, emptiness and hunger.

I'm a big fan of the BBC series *Broadchurch*, about a seaside village in southern England where something bad happens to the small population each season. The resident vicar, and Anglican priest, complains at the beginning of this season that his church was full when the people were going through difficulties and tragedy struck, but when they got over the event and resumed everyday life, they no longer showed up. He determined, rightly or not, that his flock had no need of God when life was going well.

Need is a layered and powerful word. In clergy life and those of the so-called helping professions, we become suspicious of those of our peers who "need to be needed" to justify their roles. This is also a risk in parenting. When a parent is no longer needed in the same ways by their children, they can lose their bearing or purpose if that energy is not channeled elsewhere.

To be labeled as needy is not the most positive way of describing others or ourselves. I've always shuttered at the label "people in need." But in God's world where the least are the greatest, the poor are rich, and humble are powerful, to be in need is not punitive or dismissive.

This space, this table – we hope -- is one place where the posturing ends. "To you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid."

We can say to ourselves and to the God to whom we pray: I'm out of gas and at the end of my rope. My patience is tattered. My confidence is shaken. My trust is shattered. My future has dimmed and my hope has been crushed.

After hearing the extended account of the match making that brought Rebekah to marry Isaac in the reading from Genesis, it is no coincidence that the action happened around water. Springs and wells in dry lands were landmarks and gathering places. We read:

"Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.'" Rebekah would later leave her family, her home, and journey far away without knowing fully what her life would become.

To the water's edge, to the spring and the well, we say, in the best sense: "God – fill me up."

We hear in the Iona prayer: *For this is the table where God intends us to be nourished.*

And more powerful yet: *This is the time when Christ can make us new.*

It is for those who: *"hunger and thirst for a deeper faith, for a better life, for a fairer world. Jesus Christ, who has sat at our tables, now invites us to be guests at his."*

The tables are turned. The guest becomes the host and welcomes us.

And when the meal is over, we clear off the table. We actually do the dishes, as it were; back there in the sacristy.

Once filled and fed, the work begins anew.

Take us out into the world to live as changed people. We can ask ourselves, on the way out and on the home, how are we changed? Do we care more? Worry less? Act differently? Become our better selves? Honestly? -- not always. But there are moments.

Any yet: we cannot remain the same.

God, indeed: *ask much of us, expect much from us, enable much by us, encourage many through us.*

May we dedicate our lives to your glory. Amen.

