



# WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Grandma’s Table”**  
**Scripture – 2 Timothy 1:1-14**  
**Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, October 2, 2016**

Growing up, I spent a lot of time at my Grandma’s table. This is where my sister and I landed after school, when there was no sports practice or play rehearsal to fill the gap between the final bell and our parents coming home from work. This is where we spent mornings when Mom and Dad were out of town. Grandma always making sure we had time for bacon and eggs and a cup of hot chocolate before Granddad dropped us off at school. This is where we gathered for the occasional weeknight meal, and when cousins came in from out-of-town, and when there was a birthday to celebrate. I spent *a lot* of time at Grandma’s table.

Whenever we came over, there was refreshment waiting for us on that table: A coke and a *Little Debbie Cake*. Applesauce Jello (one of Grandma’s specialties that I’ve never figured out how to re-create). Beef stroganoff. Spaghetti with chili on top (straight off the Steak ‘n Shake menu). Chocolate chip cookies with a single pecan pressed into the freshly-baked dough. There was something special about that table. It was a place of laughter and love, a place where I felt comfortable and safe.

Grandma’s table was not an overtly theological place ... at least, I didn’t think of it that way at the time. There was no “God Talk,” so to speak. We mostly talked about our days, until things devolved into silliness with Granddad wiggling his ears and trying to hang a spoon on his nose. And yet, this is the place where the lessons I learned in Sunday School came to life. This is where I saw service in action, as Grandma prepared the meal and set the table, and then taught us to serve one another. This is where I learned that hospitality meant setting a place for everyone – including the ever-widening circle of friends I brought home from elementary school and high school and college, whom my grandparents welcomed and treated as their own. This is where I came to know deep in my bones that I was – and am – a beloved child of God.

My Mom likes to say that my Grandma was our clearest expression of grace. And, when I think back to that table, I know that she’s right. That table is where I experienced the unconditional love of God through the flesh and blood embrace of a grandparent, through the beautifully ordinary moments of life. With every *Little Debbie Cake*, Grandma planted seeds of faith. And with each chocolate chip cookie (always with a pecan pressed into the freshly-baked dough), she watered these seeds until they bore fruit. I see now, that – around her table, through everyday acts of generosity – Grandma nurtured my faith just as she nourished my body.

I like to think that we all have a table like this – one where we taste the love and grace of God through the hospitality of others. For some of us, it *is* the table of a parent or a grand-parent or, perhaps, the table of a family we’ve chosen or adopted. It might be the table of a dear friend who always has a cup of tea ready when you come over; or the table at your favorite brunch spot, where you sit with church family after worship. But we all need

these tables – tables where we glimpse God at work through the fellowship of another. We need these tables because faith is best lived in community – around people who can plant and water the seeds of faith, and then can replant them when the ugliness of the world threatens to choke out the seedlings taking root. We need people who embrace us with the love of Christ, and who can help us remember that we are beloved children of God. We need people who can nurture the gifts of God in us, and send us back out to love the world as best we can.

This is something Christians have known for centuries – that faith is best lived in community, that we need others to embody the love of Christ and call us back to ourselves.

I think that's why Paul opens his letter to Timothy by recalling those who have gone before. He remembers his *own* ancestors – men and women who worshipped the Lord, and who passed their faith along to Paul. And he recalls *Timothy's* family, giving thanks to God for the matriarchs who planted in him the seeds of faith. "I am reminded of your sincere faith," Paul writes, "a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." From the get go, Paul reminds his protégé that he is not in this alone, that he need not – and **cannot** – live out this calling in isolation.

You see, this is a letter of encouragement to Timothy – the one upon whom Paul laid his hands and commissioned for ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. But now, it seems, Timothy's "faithfulness is in question."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the news of Paul's imprisonment has sent Timothy spiraling out of control, unsure whether he can remain committed to the Gospel in the face of persecution. Perhaps, with each message of contradiction from the dominant culture, shame has settled into Timothy's bones. Such persecution and shame were not uncommon to the early church, which clung to the hope of the cross even in a world that derided and mocked believers. It would not have been surprising for these followers of Jesus to have abandoned the **Way** in the face of it all. Whatever the cause, Timothy's faith is wavering. So Paul writes to encourage this disciple to *quote*: "rekindle the gift of God that is within you." And he does so by pointing Timothy to the people who formed him – to the matriarchs who modeled faithfulness, and who embodied the love of Christ through the flesh and blood embrace of family.

I like to think that – upon receiving Paul's letter – Timothy returned to his mother's table, or his grandmother's table. Perhaps he sat with these women who had modeled service and demonstrated hospitality, who had first borne witness to the love and grace of God. Maybe in this season of crisis, he sought out the ones who – with each piece of Eunice's sweet cake – had planted in him the seeds of faith, and who had watered these seeds with every batch of Lois' famous cookies (the ones with the almonds pressed into the freshly-baked dough). I imagine his mother's table and his grandmother's table were the sites where Timothy went to rest in the embrace of community, to rediscover the grace of God, and to rekindle that gift of which Paul spoke.

Timothy needed people of faith to call him back to himself when his faith wavered and his faithfulness was in question. And, truth be told, we ourselves are not so different than Timothy. In a sense, we all need this in seasons when trust does not come easily ... when the brokenness of the world threatens to make a mockery of faith. In many ways, it feels like we're mired in a stormy season. Because we live in a world that betrays our Creator. We live in a world where our black brothers fear that they won't make it home if they get stopped by police, and where Syrian sisters must flee their homes in order to save their children. We live in a world where row-house fires steal the lives of faithful servants, and where guns steal the lives of the innocent. There is *so much* in this world that tears away at our faith in a God who wills and works for peace ... so much that threatens to choke out the seeds that have been planted and watered – no matter how deep the roots. It is no wonder that followers of Jesus succumb to doubt in the face of it all.

And when this doubt seeps into our bones, we need to return to the communities that nurtured in us the seeds of faith; we need to sit at the tables where we are filled and renewed, so that we can go out and love the world all over again. In these seasons when our faith wavers and our faithfulness is in question, when we long for an

encounter with Christ, we rely on the communities that can call us back to who we are and the tables where we have found love and grace.

I can't return to my Grandma's table; she and my grandfather passed away years ago. But there are other tables. There's my Mom's, where a new generation of children is beginning to learn about God's love and grace through the embrace of family. There are the tables of friends and colleagues who water the seeds of faith. There are tables in Community Hall, where I sit with you and come away with my own faith strengthened. But, most of all, there is *this* table – the one that stands before us, ready for the feast.

This is the table where our community gathers, the whole body of Christ bound neither by place nor time. This is where we sit with mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, sisters and brothers and friends the world over ... those who have gone before, and those who are with us still. They are all here, ready to embrace us with the love of family and to nurture within us the seeds of faith. This, my friends, is the table to which we return when we need to taste the love and grace of God. This is where we come to encounter Christ, in broken bread and wine poured out, in the ordinary-extraordinary moments of life. For the one in whom we put our trust is here, waiting to welcome us to the feast – even when our faith wavers and our faithfulness is in question. Christ beckons us to the table, ready to rekindle in us the gift of God and to transform our stale faith into a faith refreshed and renewed.

Friends, there is a seat for you at this table. So come, take your place.

1. Lewis R. Donelson, *Feasting on the Word*, 137.

### **World Communion Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Eternal God, Creator of all that has been, all that is and all that ever shall be, we come to this table on World Communion Sunday to celebrate the meal Jesus consecrated 2,000 years ago when he gathered with his 12 disciples in a house in Jerusalem. We give thanks for the ties that bind us together in our church family as brothers and sisters who truly care for one another.

We are grateful for times

to pray and sing and ponder your word together,  
to learn and laugh together,  
to hold each other up when storms blow in,  
to lock arms when we battle demons determined to shred the fabric of our communities,  
and to join together in taking your love out to a hurting world.

Loving God, living in an age when many seek to accentuate differences and to create friction between people by slicing the world up according to race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, economic standing, and political affiliation, we recall the words of Scripture that each person is created in your image – even the ones with whom we disagree – and that we are to love others as ourselves.

Remind us that differences can divide us, but differences can also enrich our lives. Differences can prompt suspicion, but differences can also add spice to life. Differences can narrow our field of vision, but differences can also broaden our understanding of our purpose in life and what brings true satisfaction.

Gracious God, on this special day when Christians around the globe celebrate this sacrament, we remember our sisters and brothers from above and below the equator and from every time zone around the globe. We are grateful

for all people of the planet who overcome darkness with light, who pry open the floodgates of justice, and who are driven by your vision of a day when we will be able to pound assault weapons into farming tools.

Everlasting God, as we break bread with one another – a variety of breads that reminds us of different cultures, colors, and customs around your amazing planet – remind us that we are one human family, and that you call us to strive for the values that generate opportunities for all to thrive, and the ideals that enhance the common good.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, “**Our Father...**