

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Alive in a Global Uprising: Waiting Tables
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Psalm 133; Acts 8:26-39

Some of you may not know that in my pre-ministry years I pursued an illustrious acting career. This career consisted mostly of waiting tables in restaurants *near* theatres, occasionally waiting on actual illustrious actors. But over the course of this career, I became, I think, pretty good at waiting tables. Not just memorizing orders and timely service. I picked up on how to anticipate a guest's needs, how to help them understand the menu and make connections between dishes and wines. I studied the best waiters in the restaurants where I worked, because they could give their guests a dining experience that would be transformational.

I like to think that my acting/waitressing career was preparing me in some way for ministry. And I feel I am affirmed in this belief by scripture.

Now, you may think that waiters do not feature in our sacred texts. But you'd be wrong.

Near the beginning of the book of Acts, the apostles are trying to figure out what this new Jesus community is supposed to look like – you know, writing the manual of operations and a mission statement and whatnot. At this time, the church consisted of both Greek and Hebrew believers. And the Greeks came to the apostles with the complaint that the Greek widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food to those in need.

So the disciples get together to talk about this problem, and their response is: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables!” Gotta love their humility.

And thus, the office of deacon is established to wait on the tables of those in need in the fledgling Christian community.

Now, shortly after this new deacon ministry is set up, the head deacon, Stephen, is seized by the Jewish Sanhedrin and stoned to death. This sets in motion a great persecution of Jesus' followers, and they scatter to the surrounding regions outside of Jerusalem.

A deacon named Philip goes to Samaria, which is a notoriously tough crowd. This waiter for Jesus is given the table filled with people who only want to complain and want to have everything their way. They order things that aren't on the menu and want you to bring condiments that are so rarely used they're expired.

But Philip begins preaching the word of God to the Samaritans anyway. He heals people and performs miracles and talks about the kingdom of God and message of Jesus Christ. And he does such a great job that everyone in town, including his toughest customer, Simon the magician, all come to believe and are baptized.

Once all the hard work is done, the apostles Peter and John step in, like the restaurant's chef and manager, to

ensure everything was done satisfactorily and to receive all the compliments. Meanwhile, Philip gets called to head down a wilderness road.

Now, a wilderness is biblical code word for transformation. Major turning points throughout God's salvation history have involved the wilderness. Think: the Israelites wandering in the wilderness; John appearing in the wilderness and reciting Isaiah's prophesy to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness; Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. We know when we hear the word wilderness that something transformational is going to happen.

But for Philip, it is a bit like showing up for your shift with no assigned section. Philip might be sent to the big party in the back or the pub tables in the bar. He might get robbed of his tips by stingy customers or have to walk miles to get to get back and forth to the kitchen. Who knows what lies ahead on a wilderness road?

But Philip continues to give his best service. As the chariot of a wealthy court official, a eunuch of Ethiopia, enters the scene, the Spirit says to Philip, "table one: all yours." And off he goes.

As the customer reads what is on offer, Philip leans in, asking if he can help clarify anything. With a bit of an attitude, the court official admits his need for help in understanding what he is reading. Philip offers explanations and makes connections. And in the fashion of the very best waiters, the court official has a transformational experience and desires to be baptized.

Now, comparing Philip's evangelism to waiting tables may not be the classical interpretation of this text. The Sunday school flannelgrams of my youth taught a method of evangelism that sounded a lot more like a car salesman than a waiter. I apologize in advance to all the people in this room who sell cars as I am about to employ all of the worst stereotypes of car salesmen. I will say right now that I'm sure no one in this church fits that stereotype, but I'm going to ask you to go along with the image for the sake of the larger point I'm making.

Okay, that said, in car salesman evangelism, we're to be on the lookout for the people wandering around the lot, not really sure what they're looking for, adrift in a sea of spiritual, moral, and secular options. We're to slickly draw them over to the shiny red convertible that is Jesus Christ. We're to offer them a test drive through the Old Testament and into the Gospels. And then we seal the deal with baptism, preferably in a river if you have one handy.

This is what most people picture today as evangelism. And I have to admit, I've never been much good at this kind of evangelism. I know, it's a strange thing for a pastor to say, but I've always felt like it would be the MOST EMBARRASSING thing in the world to insert myself into someone else's reality and worldview in this pushy way. I am a terrible salesman.

But I was a good waiter. So I take heart in reading Philip's evangelism through that lens.

This form of evangelism agrees with my palette much more than the car salesman approach. It is something that can happen any ordinary day, any ordinary time, as regular as eating a meal. Whereas, with the car salesman, we have to be looking to make a major change, a huge investment.

Waiters begin with the needs of the other, discovering who they are and what they like. Car salesmen have a

particular vehicle that they need to move off the lot by convincing the customer that they need it.

Waiters help people understand the whole of the salvation story, the context and nuance. And it helps them connect the words on the page to the world around them. Car salesmen provide a carefully scripted set of information intended to have the highest rate of success in making the sale.

Successful car salesmen need to make you feel like you have a problem that needs to be fixed, a deficiency that needs to be rectified. Whereas when we come to dine at a restaurant, it isn't because we can't cook at home or grab a Hot N Ready pizza. There's not necessarily a problem in our lives that needs fixing. We are looking for an experience. Maybe even, with the best of waiters, we can have a transformational experience, an experience that enriches our lives and perhaps even changes them. Maybe only in some small way. But again, the wonderful thing about restaurant waiter evangelism is that it can happen over and over again. You can turn a one-time visitor into a regular customer. Car salesman evangelism, on the other hand, is a one-shot deal. Once that car drives off the lot, who knows when or if you'll ever see that person again. There's no guarantee the product you've sold them will change their life for the better, or in any way at all. The best you can hope for is that they'll come back around for regular maintenance.

We are on a wilderness road, not just as a church, not just First Presbyterian Church, but the universal church, or at the very least, the church in Europe and North America. We are on a wilderness road, a transformational space. We are once again at a turning point in the salvation story. God is about to do a new thing, and we are called to be a part of it. But it requires leaving the easy comforts of the familiar, setting aside the safety of strategies that have proven successful in the past, and moving down a dangerous and unfamiliar road.

And on that road, I guarantee we will find people like the Ethiopian official, people who are at the center of culture but on the outskirts of the religious "in" group. People who are curious about God, who want to know who Jesus really is, who are being moved by the Holy Spirit to seek meaning and purpose in their lives.

I am confident we will encounter those people because I know we already have. I imagine most of us know at least one person who is spiritually curious but institutionally skeptical. Someone who used to go to church but found it wasn't answering the questions they were asking? Someone who explores spirituality but thinks negatively about religion?

Table one: all yours.

I'm going to challenge us all to show up and wait some tables. Serve those people who are puzzled by our menu of offerings – our scriptures and worship practices, our beliefs and institutional organization. Discern their needs and hear their longings. Help them understand and make connections. Provide them with a transformational experience, within our walls and outside of them.

It is not the most glorious of professions, waiting tables. Nor is it the most lucrative. But it is our calling, and one we can't ignore.

Let us pray: God of grace, We thank you for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ, For this good news that we get to share. Help us to wait upon those who are seeking the nourishment your love and truth provide. Help us to serve them with patience and grace, that they, and we, might be transformed, again and again, day after

day, meal after meal, until we reach that final heavenly banquet. Amen.