

“A Seat at the Children’s Table”
Hebrews 12:1-13
Homecoming & All Saints’ Sunday
November 7, 2004
Sermon by Jan Edmiston

The dining room in my maternal grandmother’s house was the site of many family reunions for many years. Homecoming in those days meant food – the soothing smells of turkey and ham, sweet potatoes and apples.

My mother is now gone. My grandmother is now gone. But that dining room table – a dark cherry Duncan Phyfe with matching chairs – is still in the family. It now sits in my sister’s dining room in Greenville, South Carolina.

In my *grandmother’s* dining room it sat under an antique chandelier. Against one wall was the matching buffet. Against another wall was the matching china cabinet. And on special occasions – over in the corner – was a card table with four folding chairs – the children’s table.

I was the oldest of the grandchildren on that side of the family, and I looked forward to the day when I would no longer be relegated to the children’s table. It was wobbly and crowded. The chairs were

uncomfortable. We never got the big centerpiece. We never got the tall candles. Somebody might knock one over reaching for a biscuit, and burn the house down.

Many a family reunion has been around *this* table too – the communion table. Some of our mothers and fathers, and husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters, and even some of our children are no longer with us. But this table is still in the family. There are candles. There is a cup. There are platters of bread. There are many memories.

Back in North Carolina, I longed to sit at the “big table” but it took a long time before that happened. With every special dinner, I would sneak into the dining room early and check out the place cards. I believed that *this* would be the day when I’d find my place there – only to locate my name at the children’s table once again.

But once I’d finally made it to the big table, things were clearly different. No more foolishness.

At the *children's* table, you could take three biscuits and maybe nobody would notice. At the children's table, we were still learning our manners. We were still figuring out what was acceptable and what was not acceptable.

But at the "big table" it was assumed that we knew our manners. But more important, it was assumed that we had a grasp of the honor and privilege of sitting with the matriarchs and patriarchs of our family.

The book of Hebrews is one of the most unique in the New Testament. It is an anonymous sermon written to early Christians who were apparently suffering hardships and persecution.¹ Some had even abandoned their faith.² But the author hoped that this sermon might encourage them to look up.

*Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,
so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

¹ Hebrews 10:32 -33 refers to their endurance of "a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution and sometimes being partners with those so treated."

² See hints of this in 2:3 (refers to neglecting "so great a salvation"), 6:4-6 (refers to those who have "fallen away").

In this historic week in our nation, some of us are feeling *plenty* uplifted and some of us are feeling rather *miserable*. But here, in this part of Hebrews, we find words of encouragement and insights for everyone – a message for Christians who are on top of the world and a message for other Christians who feel like they are enduring a great trial.

According to the book of Hebrews, faithful people of all kinds can look back and find comfort in being surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses” – Abraham and Moses, Rahab and David, and many unnamed saints whose souls still inspired the living. All of them were long gone by the time this book was written³, but their spirits continued to encourage believers. If only these Christians in the throes of strife could understand that *the people who’ve gone before them* had also experienced great strife. But they had endured.

My husband Fred and I visited a Presbyterian Church in the Irish countryside years ago that was surrounded by its own vast cemetery. Unlike other country churches with the historic cemetery out back, you had to walk

³ Scholars have determined that Hebrews was written sometime after Paul's letters (late 70s?) but before 96 AD because it is quoted extensively by I Clement (which was written in 96).

through the cemetery of that church in order to reach the front door. The cemetery completely surrounded the sanctuary.

At first, this seemed a little creepy. But on second thought, it was rather inspirational. On the way into worship, one was forced to acknowledge the faithful who had come before, to notice the people who had died young, the ones who died in times of famine, the ones who died in wars. But they had endured in faith. And if *they* could, then surely *we* could. To be literally *surrounded* by *so great a cloud of witnesses* on your way into worship every Sunday must have been inspiring. It was if the saints were cheering you on.

They were not cheering from a cold grave. They were cheering from place where they had been healed.

Today is the perfect day to celebrate Homecoming because we are also celebrating All Saints' Sunday – that day when we remember the saints who have gone before us in the past year. We are *still* surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who still inspire us and strengthen us even though they

are gone. They don't cheer us on from cold graves. They are cheering from the heavens.

Perhaps they once shared a place at *this* table with us. But now they have moved to “the big table” – the heavenly table. Jesus once told his Twelve Disciples that one day they would eat and drink at *his* table in *his* kingdom.⁴ The ultimate “big table.”

While we don't know the details of heaven, we hold fast in faith the belief that there is a reunion beyond all reunions after this life – the communion of the saints.⁵ As for us, our place is still at the children's table at least for now.

We still have some work to do. We are God's children, and God is still training us, still teaching us, still disciplining us. Apparently it's not yet time for us to move up. We are still learning our place. We were still figuring out what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

⁴ Luke 22:30

⁵ I believe in “the communion of saints” is a line from The Apostles' Creed.

How are we doing with these lessons? Can we be trusted at this point not to take more than we need? Can we be trusted not to burn the house down?

One day, by God's grace, I pray that we will experience the honor and privilege of sitting with the matriarchs and patriarchs of our family of faith. And what a great day that will be.

But for now, we still find our place at the children's table and that's not so bad. At the children's table, we still have a place even when we make mistakes. At the children's table, we are loved and fed and *disciplined* when we *forget* our place. At the children's table, all we have to do is acknowledge that we are members of God's family, and take our place.

Today we remember those who were once at this table – the Lord's table – with us. Maybe it was a table in another church building. Or maybe it was this one. In the brown friendship folios this morning, you will find place cards and I invite you to take a place card and write down the name of someone who is joining us at this table in spirit.

As we come forward for communion today, you can set the place card on the table and we will remember others who – just last year or many years ago – once came to this table with us – the saints of God.

And in the meantime, as we endure the great and small burdens of life, remember this:

- Jesus endured hostility beyond anything we can imagine. And he did not lose heart.
- Jesus literally bled for the sake of others, and he did not shirk his role of God's child.

*So lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees
and make straight paths for your feet,
so that what is lame may not be put out of joint,
but rather be healed.*

And the joy of communion will be ours.

Let us pray:

Only you can give us what we need to endure, Holy God. Lift us up in this hour and grant us healing and peace, we pray in the name of Christ our risen Savior. Amen.

