

A Bigger Table

Building Messy, Authentic,
and Hopeful Spiritual Community

John Pavlovitz

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer



WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

© 2017 John Pavlovitz

First Edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Westminster John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396. Or contact us online at www.wjkbooks.com.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

Book design by Drew Stevens
Cover design by Mary Ann Smith

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pavlovitz, John, author.

Title: A bigger table : building messy, authentic, and hopeful spiritual community / John Pavlovitz.

Description: First Edition. | Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017013697 (print) | LCCN 2017031110 (ebook) | ISBN 9781611648256 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664262679 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Christianity and culture—United States.

Classification: LCC BR526 (ebook) | LCC BR526 .P39 2017 (print) | DDC 261—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017013697>

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Westminster John Knox Press advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. The text paper of this book is made from 30 percent postconsumer waste.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

This book is dedicated to Jen, Noah, and Selah, to Mom, Brian, Eric, and Michelle, and to my father, John Pavlovitz, who taught me how to be a dad, and who believed in me before I ever went viral. You're still my hero and I miss you.

Contents

Introduction: A Wednesday Morning in November	ix
Part I: Big God, Small Table	1
1. Finding My Place	3
2. When in Rome	15
3. Going against the Family	25
4. Earthquakes and Aftershocks	35
5. The Truth Shall Get You Fired	45
Part II: Building the Bigger Table	55
6. Jesus the Table Setter	57
7. Radical Hospitality	65
8. Total Authenticity	75
9. True Diversity	83
10. Agenda-Free Community	95
Part III: Under Construction	103
11. Show Them the Ocean	105
12. Bullies, Bibles, and Bullhorns	113
13. Pharisees, Heresies, and Least-Lovers	123
14. The Church Will Be Queer	133
15. Mama Bear Hugs and Mama Dragon Fire	143
16. A Pastor, a Rabbi, and an Imam Walk into a Bar	153
17. Fear Less	161
18. Is the Table Really Big Enough?	169
Acknowledgments	175
A Word for Pastors	177
Discussion Guide	183

Introduction

A Wednesday Morning in November

Some days you don't welcome the sun. Some days you dread it.

From a distance, it could have been just another Wednesday morning in November, but it wasn't. This one was planet rocking. It was foundation shifting. It was faith shaking. On this particular Wednesday morning in November 2016, so much about my country seemed different. On this morning I couldn't help but wake up and feel as though the table had become decidedly smaller—and that religion had helped make it so. As someone who has spent the last two decades in the trenches as a pastor in the local church trying to craft a more diverse, open, expansive expression of the Christian faith, it was a day of deep grieving and profound sadness. There was a sense that we'd squandered a priceless opportunity, that we'd gone backward, that we'd failed one another. It wasn't just the election results themselves; it was the realization that regardless of those results the damage had already been done, the poison had already been released into the bloodstream. We'd seen too much and learned too much to go back to who we'd been before—and going forward didn't quite seem like an option yet. Grief will freeze you if you let it, and I felt frozen. Many of us did.

And it wasn't merely the reality of the man we'd allowed to ascend to the presidency that brought the mourning, though that would be reason enough for despair for many of us. It was the cruelty we'd witnessed in one another as he'd made his way there, the sickness that the America we love had shown itself afflicted with. It was the suffocating weight of every horrible reality about our nation; all that bigotry and discord and hatred set upon our chests, hampering our breath. But it was much

closer than that, too. It was the words we'd heard from family members, the things we'd learned about our neighbors, the social media posts from church friends, the incendiary sermons from our pastors, the arguments we'd had with coworkers. It was the stuff we'd learned about ourselves. On this Wednesday morning in November, we woke as a terribly altered people.

Perhaps more than any period in recent history, the yearlong presidential campaign leading up to this particular Wednesday morning had greatly renovated the landscape of religion in my country. The already deep divides had become cavernous, with Americans driven to opposite poles largely along political party lines. The closer Election Day came, the more incendiary the rhetoric grew, the more combustible conversations became, the more civility evaporated. Yes, this had always been somewhat true of our political process, and sadly the recent history of Christianity in America had increasingly been characterized by a growing schism between Left and Right—but this year everything was different. This year any glossy veneer of our diverse coexistence was stripped away and we saw the terrible ugliness beneath with clarity. In fact this ugliness sadly became valuable political currency—something to purchase power with.

Donald Trump ran unapologetically on a platform of exclusion and division, on fear of the other, on protection from encroaching foreign threat. He spoke of building walls and registering Muslims and beating up protesters. Coded in words about “taking back America” and “making America great again,” at its core his message was one of a smaller, whiter, wealthier table. And yet despite the vitriol he dispensed and the divisiveness he generated and the violence his campaign yielded at rallies and in rising hate crimes, Trump was somehow embraced by large numbers of (mainly white, conservative) Christians who looked at the candidate's body of work, littered with vile words and moral failings and unscrupulous business dealings—and deemed it all acceptable. As the race wound into the fall, high-profile preachers began aligning themselves with the GOP candidate, leveraging their pulpits and platforms to champion his cause. Local church leaders

became less apprehensive about injecting themselves into the political process and more vocal in their support of him. Otherwise strictly sin-intolerant Christians engaged in all manner of theological gymnastics in order to justify Trump as somehow the *lesser of two evil* options.

And with each pastor's public endorsement and with every social media sanctioning, the disconnect between American Christianity and the Jesus of the Gospels became more noticeable to those of us looking closely and grieving it all. We watched the bigger table being dismantled in real time. People both inside and outside of organized religion saw the uneasy alliance of the Church and the GOP front-runner and strained to make sense of it. In fact, in the wake of the campaign, many people already disheartened and pushed to the periphery of organized religion left for good. Trump's eventual victory was for many in typically marginalized communities merely a ratification of the corrosive things unearthed, a ceremonial crowning of it all. It was irrefutable proof that they are not welcome at the table.

For nearly twenty years I've been working with like-hearted people to craft the kind of loving, redemptive spiritual community that could span all divides and would force no one to find alternatives or fend for themselves, community that transcends all difference. I've always believed such a place was possible, and so with great hope that was the book I set out to write eighteen months ago. The toxic venom of the presidential campaign, the wounds it has inflicted on so many, and the Christian church's unprecedented participation in the process during that time has left me certain that our efforts to build a bigger table are more needed than ever, yet in some ways we are further from that aspiration than we've ever been. And so the questions I asked myself on that particular Wednesday morning are the same ones I ask here: Can the table really be expanded so that everyone has a place? What is the way forward, given the unprecedented divisiveness we're experiencing? How do we transform this nearly paralyzing sense of sadness into something worth pursuing?

Many people are grieving the loss of the America they thought they knew; they are mourning their old picture of home or their image of church. As with all grief, eventually there must be *movement*. When there is profound loss of any kind, the only real path is forward; it is trying to create something meaningful and life affirming in response to what has been taken away. As you move ahead from the moment of trauma, you begin the painful, laborious act of living in direct opposition to your grief. You learn to walk again, even if it is with a limp. It is the same in these days for those of us who feel cheated out of a kinder, more diverse, more decent America than the one it feels like we now have. It is the same for those of us lamenting a religion that seems to have become smaller than ever. Individually and collectively, we will have to be the resistance—offering daily, bold, defiant pushback against all that feels wrong here. This pushback will come as we loudly and unapologetically speak truth where truth is not welcome. It will come as we connect with one another on social media and in faith communities and in our neighborhoods, and as we work together to demand accountability from our elected officials and pastoral leaders. It will come in the small things: in the art we create and the conversations we have and the quiet gestures of compassion that are barely visible. It will come in the way we fully celebrate daily life: having dinner with friends, driving through the countryside, playing in the yard with our children, laughing at a movie we love. It will come as we use the shared resources of our experience and our talents and our numbers to ensure that our children inherit a world worth being here for. It will come as we transform our grief into goodness.

Yes, friend, there has been a great deal to grieve over in recent days, and you will likely find more reason to grieve as you read these words—but there is even more worth fighting for. Wherever you are on your journey and whatever your religious and political convictions, consider this an invitation to enter into the conversation. This book isn't about battling dogmas, it isn't about competing faith traditions, and it isn't about

opposing politics. This book is about humanity, about the one flawed family that we belong to and the singular, odd, staggeringly beautiful story we all share. It's about trying to excavate those priceless truths from beneath the layers of far less important things that we've piled on top of them since we've been here. It's about jettisoning everything in and around us that would shrink our tables. I'll tell a bit of my story in the coming pages in the hopes that you'll find some of your own story there, and I'll share the lessons I've acquired through time, failure, scars, mentors, and people much wiser than I. Yes, one day in November did indeed change everything. We need the bigger table now more than ever.

Pull up a chair.

PART ONE

Big God, Small Table

1

Finding My Place

Before I knew better, I assumed that everyone had a seat at the same table that I did. For nearly the first two decades of my life in perpetually snow-blanketed Central New York, I'd been a fairly well-behaved, white, middle-class, suburban, Italian, Roman Catholic boy. I had supportive parents, a loving family, and by most measurements a young man's dream childhood, filled with pool parties, pizza binges, playground football, farting contests, spontaneous backyard campouts—and epic air-guitar battles. When I think about those days now, I recall laughing a lot, paying way too much attention to comic books, neighborhood girls, and rock stars, and generally feeling safe and secure in my cozy little half-frozen corner of the world.

Being both Italian *and* Catholic meant that I was raised on gluten and guilt. I had lots of pasta and lots of repentance (and decades later I still have a healthy appetite for both). As is true for so many of my tribe, our kitchen was a holy place, the continually simmering heart of our family. It was a place of sustenance and communion and belonging, thick with the sweet aroma of basil and frying meatballs and the sound of Frank Sinatra. From an early age, religion, rules, and rituals were the

bedrock of our weekly family routine, woven into my daily studies and athletics and even my social life, by parents who valued the structure and moral values they hoped this would instill in me. As a result, faith formed the steady background noise of my daily life, with God always hovering overhead like the Spirit over the water at Creation—or maybe more like a stern, matronly grandmother making sure you washed properly. Either way, my hands stayed clean and I didn't cuss all that much.

For as long as I could remember, I had two really great stories planted within my heart, stories that not everyone has. The first was the story of a family that loved me. They spent time with me, told me that I mattered, that I was adored, that I could be anything I dreamed of being—and that they were *for* me. Home was a sanctuary. It was belonging. It was a soft place for my soul to find rest. Second, I had a story about God. In my God story, God was real, God was good, and I was fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of this very good God. (Admittedly this was a particularly tough sell during puberty and middle school breakups.) My faith story told me that God was massive and made everything, yet this same God knew me intimately and loved me completely. It was and is a beautiful and (I believe) true story, one that for most of my life has yielded the awareness that I was never alone and that God was always present. This realization has been at times comforting and at other times terrifying, depending on the day and my agenda.

Yet along with my stories about a big God who loved little me, and an affectionate family who was for me, I also inherited some *false* stories too, about people of color, about gay people, about poor people, about addicts, about born-again Christians, about atheists. In my handed-down narratives, these people were all to be avoided or feared, or at the very least approached with great skepticism, because something about the stories I'd learned told me that I was just a little bit more deserving of the love of this big God than they were. Some of these folks I looked at with pity and others with contempt, but I saw them *all* as surely undeserving of the close proximity to God that I

as his favorite son had been blessed with. Most of us are raised in a similarly self-centered faith story, asking, “If God is for me, who can be against me?” and assuming that there is some competition with others that we are required to win in order to secure our acceptance. Such thinking forces us to quickly become experts at exclusion and at crafting a God who plays favorites. This is far easier when everything around you tells you that your skin color, gender, or orientation guarantee your place at the table.

My story told me that I was a beloved child and those whose lives were seemingly foreign to me were at best barely tolerated foster children who needed to do some work in order to earn a seat. I couldn’t have described it that way then, but I remember how it felt to think about God and to count myself close and cared for, while believing so many others remained distant and disregarded. The truth I would later come to learn was that I was just another begging roadside leper who wrongly imagined himself a righteous Pharisee. False stories and small tables will do that every time. In fact, the source of the greatest dissonance in the modern Church is the belief that there are clearly defined insiders and outsiders; that God is somewhere *up there* keeping score like a cosmic Santa Claus, and we all need to figure out how to separate people into allies and adversaries, lest we align ourselves with the damned and not the saved, and guarantee our damnation.

These faulty biographies handed down to me weren’t the result of targeted, sinister indoctrination by the adults around me or delivered through any specific verbal instruction. They were simply the predictable by-product of being around people who looked and talked and believed the way that they did. When this happens, your table is going to be small. That’s what uniformity usually breeds: an inherited affinity for the familiar and a fear of what isn’t. When the table you’re used to sitting at is small, so too is your understanding of those seated elsewhere. Over time I’d quietly developed a subtly narcissistic religious worldview where God gradually became the *God of the Good People*, and conveniently the “good people” tended to

always look and sound and believe an awful lot like I did. This was my spiritual incubator during the first eighteen years or so of my journey, and for most of that time it worked for me. Privilege usually works for those who have it, unless they are so roused that they are able to see with fresh eyes and notice their blind spots and the great advantage in their experience. Like a stain on the back of your shirt: you usually can't easily see your privilege and you need good, honest people around you to tell you—and then you need to listen.

Sometimes life tries to teach you and you have the good fortune to be paying attention. Age can illuminate things that used to be in shadow. The older you get, the more clearly you see that *all* of us are the products of our individual stories: the place we're born, the home of our youth, the experiences we have, the education we receive, and the people who frequently speak into our lives. Our specific, never-to-be-duplicated history shapes the way we see the world, the way we understand ourselves, the way we think about God. In both beautiful and disappointing ways, this had been my story. It came with blessings and liabilities that were mine alone. Although I had an image of a God who was towering and loving and present, I had a view of the world that was frighteningly narrow, where far too many people were disqualified from intimacy with that God. I wasn't a bad kid, I was just misinformed. Chances are, had I stayed where I was geographically, I would have continued to be loved and encouraged and cared for. I would have remained comfortably nestled in the narrative of my childhood and had that story reinforced by people who genuinely treasured me. I would have probably become a fairly decent, responsible adult with a tidy, albeit terribly selective narrative about the world—and my table would have stayed far too small for the God I claimed to believe in. Then God gave me Philadelphia. Hallelujah.

When you win a goldfish at the fair by tossing a ping-pong ball into his tiny bowl, you know you can't just dump the poor thing from his cozy little temporary Ziploc home and

into a massive tank, because the system shock will likely kill him. Too much change too soon is a certain death sentence, and so you need to gradually ease the little guy into the bigger world, or that world will quickly overwhelm him and invariably leave him permanently swimming sideways—and you'll be flushing your newly earned trophy down the toilet. Thirty years ago I was a wide-eyed, suburban goldfish dropped from thirty thousand feet, straight into the churning heart of Philadelphia's murky Schuylkill River. Looking back, it's difficult to comprehend how my head didn't simply explode upon arrival at the corner of Broad and Pine, but I suppose this is what *grace* actually looks like, practically speaking. It allows you to find quite tolerable, even enjoyable, what might otherwise kick the living snot out of you. As my feet first hit the rugged, blistered pavement of the City of Brotherly Love, I stepped unexpectedly into a waiting Technicolor ambush of God-sized diversity, and though I couldn't know it then, my table was about to be expanded and my calling about to be born. Had I realized it all at the time, I would have removed my shoes, because these loud, weathered streets were indeed most holy ground. The ordinary always is.

I had no aspirations to be a pastor in these days, no inkling that ministry was even an option. In truth, I was at best a hopeful agnostic, barely having anything resembling a working faith except a few randomly strung-together remnants from my childhood Catholicism: stubborn, sacred holdouts loosely strewn through an ever-growing disbelief. On a scholarship to the University of the Arts as a graphic design major, I was suddenly surrounded by and living among artists, musicians, dancers, and actors, for most of whom theology was a late, lingering afterthought if it was a thought at all. This wasn't *church* as I recognized it, but it was a decidedly bohemian alternative congregation, where I regularly began working out my big-boy faith with fear, trembling—and lots of cheesesteaks. There were no Bible study groups or Sunday worship services or midweek prayer meetings, none of the familiar trappings of religion that I'd grown up with, but stuff was happening in me

just the same—deep, fundamental, soul-renovating stuff. Back then, from the outside I would have probably been what modern traditional Christian culture identifies as *unchurched*: non-religious, lost, and needing to be rescued. In the all-or-nothing battle lines that the modern Church has carved out, my lack of participation in a recognized local faith community would have ensured this label. But labels rarely do justice to those on whom we affix them.

In the eyes of the faithful, I was simply off God's grid. But the deeper truth was not as easily distinguished. I couldn't even see it myself at the time, but the place was absolutely teeming with the things of God: the pungent bouquet of brightly colored gobs of oil paint slathered across canvases, the rhythmic stomps of synchronized dancers' feet hitting the hardwood studio floors, the meandering harmonies of impromptu choirs rising from the stairwells to mix with the street noise outside—a jazz fusion of humanity that Miles Davis would've marveled at. There was creativity and discovery and collaboration, and some of the most authentic community I'd ever known or would ever know. I realize now that this wasn't just an inner-city art school; it was a covert cathedral wrapped in concrete and fluorescent lights, a strikingly diverse masterpiece by Divinity's hand, even if I couldn't recognize it or name it at that time. During those first weeks I spent glorious nights perched on high-rise balconies with new friends talking about life and love and the future. I began living alongside people whom my story had previously kept at a safe distance. And with every new relationship and every stereotype-busting exchange, I was slowly being pulled from the tiny, climate-controlled Ziploc-bag bubble of my childhood God story and into a wide expanse that would make way for what was coming. My soul was being tilled like rich, hard-packed soil in preparation for something new and beautiful to grow, something far greater than what I had understood religion to be and something far more suited to the One who I had been taught spoke the very planet into being and who gave consent for my very heart to begin beating. Philadelphia was giving me a crash course in the stunning

breadth and creativity of the maker of color, light, and sound. God was using a wonderfully odd collection of painters and piano players and comic book artists to rewrite my story. I was in the middle of a stunning plot twist—and was largely oblivious to it all. I just knew it was beautiful.

Turns out that this was Jesus' vision of the world too: life as cathedral. He moved through the streets and fields and homes of Palestine reminding people of the staggering glory that was beneath their feet and around their tables. He called people's attention to a "kingdom of heaven" that was in their midst if they could only become aware of it. It was a holistic understanding of divinity, where nothing was untouched by the hand of God; one where, as the apostle Paul would later describe, everyone was a living church, a breathing sanctuary (1 Cor. 3:16–17). Our modern understanding of spirituality is a far more binary endeavor, strictly dividing the world into the sacred and the secular, into religious life (which usually happens in a building for an hour on Sunday) and life outside religion (usually the other, more fun stuff). This makes building a bigger table a real challenge.

Things outside my college campus were no less revelatory, no less jarring, no less disorienting to my previously cloistered religious operating system. Philadelphia offered a free master class in beautiful, messy diversity. My first off-campus apartment was just off of Broad Street right in the loud, crackling heart of things, and my second-floor window overlooking Pine Street gave me the perfect perch to watch the daily ragamuffin parade. I had a front-row seat to life beyond the edges of the small table of my youth and childhood religion, as if I'd reached the edge of an old world and was blazing a trail to something previously untouched in my mind and heart. I may as well have been an alien because everything felt foreign to me, but in the best possible way. It's true that a change of environment gives you new eyes to view the world through, and I was seeing like never before. During my first year there I spent countless hours meandering through the city, over the weathered cobblestones from the first days of our nation as

they intersected swaths of scalding, freshly paved asphalt. In the same block I'd pass pristine, hundred-year-old brownstones, nondescript Chinese restaurants, surprising preserved green spaces, and hand-painted murals on repurposed shuttered storefronts. *This* was the city I was falling in love with in its completeness: not a series of sharply delineated separate entities to be received on their own, but a stunning, continuous mosaic of disparate pieces that together made something new. Without *any* of those pieces it would cease to be the community that it was; its true identity was fashioned from that very specific diversity on display.

What I stepped into there each day was stark-naked *life*, stripped of the glossy veneer of my suburban past; jagged-edged, urine-soaked, graffiti-tagged, unsanitized reality I'd never experienced before. I found myself to be a new, tiny, irregular piece shoved awkwardly in a massive mosaic of need and affluence, of diverse dialects and unfamiliar spices, of street vendors and corner prostitutes, of young families and elderly beggars—and I found every second of it thrilling, if not regularly terrifying. I rubbed elbows with people I had no previous frame of reference for and began to wake up to the common ground in our shared humanity. I witnessed violence and poverty not as isolated news stories, but as the regular rhythm of the daily painful existence many people had to experience as their normal, one that I'd never imagined. It all began slowly softening my heart and breaking into new places in my brain, laying the foundation for the kind of pastor I would one day aspire to become—an *all-people* pastor.

I earned money my freshman year working at the university's café. For a lifelong foodie with a high metabolism and a low budget, this job was a perfect storm of pure goodness. I was able to help prepare amazing meals and to interact with students and faculty each afternoon working the front end. My dad's salesman genes were allowed to come to full fruition in me, and the counter provided a kind of stage where I could daily dispense one-liners, make people laugh, and in general

offer the kind of gregarious hospitality that he had instilled in me, bolstered by a shared work ethic in which we both took tremendous pride. Every day I got the chance to literally welcome people to the table and to serve them well. It gave me great satisfaction to be a kind presence in their lives each day, and I loved being affectionately referred to as Café John around campus. In fact, I always felt a little like I was getting away with something by being paid for this gig—and regularly taking home chafing dishes filled with lasagna was a pretty nice bonus too.

Joe and Danny ran the café, which also catered the university's gallery receptions and fund-raising dinners. They'd hired both me and my freshman roommate Pete, and the two of them were excellent bosses to us, with that delicate balance of warmth and discipline that knows when to keep things loose and when to rein them in. We pumped a lot of food out of that tiny, stifling kitchen and we laughed hysterically in the process. There I learned the importance of creating a culture where people could do their best work, of hiring talented folks and releasing them to do what they were uniquely capable of doing. When someone really loves their work in any walk of life it shows, and both Joe and Danny seemed to revel in the work we all did together. Sure it was their livelihood, but it was a kind of ministry too, even if they didn't quite frame it that way. They were setting the table and feeding people. Their efforts were meeting people's physical needs along with attending to their spirits. I've always believed that anything done with care and joy can be an act of worship, and the kitchen for me has often been a form of church, even if the anointing oil in this case was olive.

A few weeks into my new job I remember thinking to myself, "Joe and Danny are *really* great friends. They run this business together, they hang out all the time, and I think they even bought a house together—what pals!" I did everything except channel one of my Italian aunts and hope out loud that they would both "find a nice girl one day." Clearly my cozy, suburban bubble upbringing was in full effect, as evidenced

by my utter naiveté and relative oblivion in the moment. I don't remember exactly when Pete and I realized that not only were they a couple—but nearly the entire rest of the café staff was gay as well. We were straight and in the decided minority, but fortunately they were all much more gracious than straight folks tend to be with the roles reversed, and most certainly kinder than the Church. They treated us with the same respect and compassion and irreverent humor they greeted the rest of the staff with and made us feel as though we belonged. It's funny how little it takes to show people they matter and what a difference it makes in inviting them into meaningful community. Kindness, it turns out, is powerfully disarming.

I confess that had I known prior to being offered the job that I would be surrounded by gay men, there's a good chance I wouldn't have accepted it. I would have immediately transposed the poorly drawn, fear-fueled caricature of homosexuality that I grew up with onto them and rationalized my way out of the situation, satisfied that I had somehow made God happy. It was a spiritual truth for me back then that separation from "sinners" was a valid moral stance that proved *my* virtue and highlighted *others'* wrongdoing. Creating space between myself and other human beings was somehow a perfectly Christian response to difference, and if I'd had the opportunity up front, I'd have taken it. I would have squirmed through a brief awkward conversation, declined the job, and left feeling like I had dodged a bullet, when in reality I would have missed God giving me a chance to expand my table. I would have sidestepped blessings in the name of my religion.

But by the time I realized, a month into the job, that Joe and Danny shared monogrammed towels, we had already spent hours together, working, talking, fighting, laughing—and we had become family. I loved these guys. They were more than theoretical examples to be debated. They were not hot-button issues or some conveniently framed moral argument that I could make snap judgments about from a safe distance. Upon closer examination, Joe and Danny and the rest of the staff were simply *people*: people I was glad that I knew and

who reflected God as clearly as anyone who passed in front of that counter each day—certainly as much as any I'd shared a church pew with back home. Their gender identity and sexual orientation made them no less image bearers of the Divine; their love was a reflection of the heart of God, not because of *who* they loved but because of *how* they loved—deeply, truthfully, and sacrificially.

The heart is a rather curious entity. Once its doors swing wide open, they can't easily be shut again. Meeting Joe and Danny had knocked the padlock off of a carefully guarded place in mine. They'd shown me that people we assume we don't have a great deal in common with are to be known and not feared. I'd reached a peaceful clearing in my previously fenced-in, heavily fortified worldview, a place I would return to again and again in my desire to be an *all-people* pastor, with varying degrees of success and failure.

Years later as a pastor, I would look and advocate for that same openness and variety in the Church and all too often find instead gentrified, sanitized, homogeneous faith communities that edited out those deemed too ragged, too left of center, or too difficult to deal with. It would be a carefully monitored and strictly policed diversity that professed to reflect heaven but more often simply reflected suburbia, with all the rough-edged people sandblasted smooth by doctrine and dogma until they were palatable enough to keep around or hid their junk or disappeared altogether. I would come to find that the openness during these days in Philadelphia that served me so well would eventually become a liability as I stepped deeper into ministry. It would be seen as a deficiency in the eyes of superiors and peers who wanted a palatable version of diversity, one that they could control, one that fit comfortably and behaved well in a one-hour worship service. The expansive table of hospitality growing in me here would eventually have to be sawed down substantially if I wanted it to fit through the church doors, because despite all our talk about seeking *all people*, the truth is we religious folk usually favor a far more selective sampling.

If I'd been at all familiar with the life and ministry of Jesus then I'd have been better prepared for this, as the fight to widen the parameters of those invited into redemptive community was his daily work. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus' Jewish tradition, always saw the table as growing too big, because their sole deservedness had been sewn into them from birth by their faith story, not unlike the narrative of white evangelicals in America exploited in our recent presidential campaign, where the fear of the other was leveraged to keep the table not only small, but also well-guarded. Jesus warns his disciples not to allow this self-centered, fear-saturated teaching of the religious elite to contaminate our understanding of the diversity around us or to create in us contempt for those who seem to stand opposite us politically, theologically, or socially (Matt. 16:5–12; 23:13).

I'd soon figure out the nuanced politics of pastoring and learn how to broker a tenuous, fragile truce between the minister I *wanted* to be and the one I was *expected* to be. I'd learn how to navigate the pew-sitting "shareholders" on whose approval my job security and financial stability both rested. As I would build up an equity of trust in the community, I would learn what I could and couldn't say and how far I could stretch people theologically before they snapped—or snapped back. And eventually I would find myself beyond that point to gloriously disastrous effect on my career, but for now as a young, hopeful agnostic artist roaming the City of Brotherly Love with no religious aspirations to speak of. I was seeing just how big the table could and should be—the one I'd later give everything to build as a pastor. It was the gathering place where strippers and gay caterers and atheists all had a standing invitation, not to receive charity from someone morally superior and not to serve as religious projects to be converted and fixed—but as welcome dinner guests of a hospitable Jesus who modeled what happens when we break bread with the broken: we find ourselves there too.

Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer

