

A Bigger Table

Building Messy, Authentic,
and Hopeful Spiritual Community

EXPANDED EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

John Pavlovitz

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Foreword

A Dream Deferred?

The framers of our nation had a radical idea, a revolutionary dream. It was a dream hewn out of their oppression at the hands of a monarch. They dared to dream of a world in which the voices of the common people mattered, the lives of the regular folks mattered.

And so, they rebelled against the monarch; they set sail for a new shore; they threw a Tea Party in the land of the free and a home of the brave. That they stole the land in order to build a sanctuary for themselves, that they built what they needed on the land with the labor of stolen bodies are horrific wounds to the soul of our nation; those wounds have not healed. That dream of white, landowning men has led to a nightmare for poor people, Black and Brown people, women, LGBTQIA people, immigrants, and non-Christians.

There is no question, in my mind, that the election of Barack Hussein Obama and the election of Donald J. Trump are two phenomena that point to the same realities. Obama's election to the highest office in the land, to be the leader of the free world, stretched that less-than-perfect dream further than most of us could imagine. When my parents—both born and raised in Jim Crow Mississippi, great-grandchildren of enslaved Africans—went to the polls to pull a lever for this man born of a white woman from Kansas and a Kenyan African man, they wept, each time. That they lived to see a Black family in the White House built by Black bodies laboring under the lash blew their hearts wide open with joy.

I'm convinced that for all the progress that Obama's election represented, for all the joy and fist-bumping and celebration of just how far we've come, there was an equal and opposite

reaction. A Black family in the White House, a dream come true for so many people in this nation, not just those of African descent, was a nightmare for many others. It cemented a feeling they had about a loss of power and privilege; that their lives did not matter, their suffering did not matter, their whiteness did not matter. This nation owed them a debt, and the presence of Obama, in a zero-sum mentality, meant they had lost. Big time. Rather than joy, their minds were blown with grief, with rage.

And so, they elected Trump, with his misogyny, racism, bloated ego, and bank account. They elected Trump and went on to declare that he was chosen by God, for such a time as this. They elected Trump, and they pinched their noses at what smelled like lying and manipulation and they prayed to God that this malcontent with a terrible reputation of womanizing and not paying his debts and discriminating against the poor would make America great, like it used to be, in their good old days.

Under this administration, the reaction to the so-called other has been violent, bloody, and the stuff of nightmares. The polite racist who knew to save certain kinds of comments for the bar or the locker room is now free to share those venomous, outrageous thoughts out in the open. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, radio shows, cable news, and op-eds. These spaces are littered with not only anti-Black racism but also bias against Hispanic/Latinx people; Jewish and Muslim people (after all, wasn't Obama a Muslim?); immigrant people (and he wasn't an American either, right?); women; LGBTQIA people; and poor people.

What breaks my heart daily is the way this hatred for the other is too often codified and sanctified by parts of the Christian church. The vitriol shows up in pulpits. That some clergy traffic in hatred rather than mercy, in the name of a poor, Brown, Jewish, homeless, refugee baby who grew up to be an itinerant rabbi preaching love, is shocking. That they preach from their pulpits that Jesus and justice are incompatible; that they aim to restrict the welcome table to those who look like

them, believe like them, who are wealthy because they are destined to be so—this mocks the gospel of rabbi Yeshua, the gospel of Jesus, whom we’ve come to call Christ.

That many of those same religious leaders continue their unwavering support for the Trump administration, even though his policies and practices, his rhetoric and writing is so anti-Christ, speaks volumes about the ways fear, anger, and insecurity can erode the better selves of good people looking for a way to make their lives work. *Give me liberty or give me death* seems to have become *Give me power by any means necessary so that I might live my life without “them.”* In other words, keep them out of my American dream, thank you very much.

CONTEXT MATTERS

In 1619, the first Africans landed here on our shores and were enslaved. Although 155 years ago, the Emancipation Proclamation liberated enslaved Africans from bondage, the vestiges of chattel slavery still plague our nation. In February 2020, the Brookings Institute posted a close examination of the wealth disparity between Black and White families. In 2016, at \$171,000, the net worth of a typical White family was nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family (\$17,150). The study truthfully lays out how these gaps in wealth “reveal the effects of accumulated inequality and discrimination, as well as differences in power and opportune that can be traced back to this nation’s inception.*

The deferred American dream goes beyond Black and White. Spanish-speaking immigrant children from South and Central America are sleeping in cages on our southern border, many separated from their families. Men, women, and children who are seeking asylum are being held in deplorable conditions both on the border and in cities around the nation.

* Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, “Examining the Black-White Wealth Gap,” *Brookings Institute*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>.

Hate speech against immigrants uttered on the national stage inspired a gunman to kill twenty-two people in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. According to Everytown research, on average, one hundred Americans are killed each day by guns, and two hundred more are shot and wounded.* Along with figuring out math, our children learn how to survive a mass shooting at school. Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Sikhs have all been killed while in worship or prayer. Hate crimes are on the rise, in this “one nation under God.”

Our economy is a dream come true for some and a nightmare for many Americans. According to Inequality.org, income disparities have become so pronounced that America’s top 10 percent now averages more than nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent. Americans in the top 1 percent tower stunningly higher. They average over thirty-nine times more income than the bottom 90 percent. But that gap pales in comparison to the divide between the nation’s top 0.1 percent and everyone else. Americans at this lofty level are taking in over 188 times the income of the entire bottom 90 percent. An estimated 43.5 percent of the total US population (140 million people) are either poor or low income. The US Census Bureau reports that women make \$.80 on the dollar year over year compared to their male counterparts, but more recent studies looking at earnings over a fifteen-year period show women make \$.49 on the dollar, and women of color earn less than White women.

In terms of sexuality, even though in 2015 marriage equality became the law of the land by a Supreme Court ruling, today seventeen states still have no workplace protections for the LGBTQIA community, leaving them vulnerable to anti-gay harassment, retaliation, and other forms of workplace abuse. In May 2019, the US House of Representatives passed the Equality Act, which would expand broad civil rights protections for LGBTQIA people, including in the workplace. But the bill faces hurdles in the Republican-controlled Senate.

* “Gun Violence in America,” Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, February 20, 2020, <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-america/>.

The Supreme Court is deliberating as to whether existing civil rights legislation applies to gay Americans. Too many Christians have surrendered Jesus' ethics of love in exchange for the placement of conservatives on the Supreme Court—conservatives expected to help folks keep their guns, make abortion illegal, and deny LGBTQIA people their rights, in the name of religious freedom.

In this context, when far too many Christians demonize the vulnerable, John Pavlovitz asks the question for the twenty-first-century church: How do we welcome God's people in the name of that barrier-breaking, table-expanding Jesus?

John is always candid, prophetic, and bold. He is a great storyteller/story-learner and is honest about his journey. In times like these, John's unique and powerful voice is essential to a public square in which Christianity has been weaponized. He creates a map for the road we can all take to follow Jesus, the carpenter, and construct a bigger table. John provides an expansive understanding of the reign of God on earth and the ways we can help complete God's dream of Shalom.

The Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis, PhD
January 2020

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 that 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 that 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.

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