Lessons from the Dining Room Table
St. Paul’s ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 4, 2019

Six months after we were married, Nancy and I began keeping track of our spending in this little brown book. The first page tells our budget for January of 1988: rent $300, car payment $100, food $110, utilities $20. Those first few years we didn’t have any extra dollars to spend. Nancy was a student at the University of Wisconsin. I was working in a day care center, doing the most challenging job I’ve ever had, earning $4.75/hour.

I’ll never forget the day we were at the grocery store standing in the broom and mop section, looking at the brooms. The old broom in the closet of our apartment was worn down to short little stubs. A new broom would cost $5.00. We decided we should wait another month to buy the broom to make sure we had enough money in our checking account.

Our life changed, slowly but surely. Three years later we were living in New Hampshire and we both had better paying jobs as public school teachers. We saved up enough money to buy a piece of land near the top of the valley in one of the quietest places in the world. There we built the two bedroom house where we lived with our two children for 19 years.

Nancy and I hammered about 15,000 nails into the walls and floors and roof of that house over a period of 16 months. 28 years ago, in August of 1991, Nancy and my dad were nailing shingles onto the roof while I was building the stairs and interior partitions. Finally, the house was finished, just in time for birth of our daughter, Eleanor. My brother in law helped me move our furniture and boxes of books and pots and pans into the house with a Uhaul truck.

That’s when I realized that we didn’t have very much in the way of furniture. We didn’t have a dresser. We didn’t have many chairs to sit in. We used an old navy trunk with a towel on top for a table next to the sofa.

My parents came to visit us. They offered to bring us their old dining room set. Someone in a church had given it to them when I was a baby, second hand, when my dad was a young pastor.

So we were the third family to use this table and chairs. The chairs were pretty beat up, so we unscrewed the seat cushions and replaced the torn upholstery with navy blue canvas cloth. We used the table and chairs for 25 years.

Two years ago Nancy and I decided it was finally time to buy new dining room furniture. It was spring time. We went shopping for a new dining room table, but when we went to the furniture store we saw the most beautiful piece of furniture I have ever seen. It was a sideboard cabinet, the kind where you keep your really good dishes. It was a work of art. It had some scratches in the top, so the people at the store had reduced the price by more than half. So we bought the most beautiful piece of furniture in the world instead of a dining room table. It looked great in our dining room.

Two months later Nancy was riding her bicycle down a busy, narrow street in the town where she grew up, Hopkinton, MA. She collided with a car. Even though she was wearing a helmet she sustained terrible injuries to her head. We sat by her side for 19 days while she lay hooked up to machines in the Intensive Care Unit in Worcester, MA. Nancy died on August 7th, 2017.

A few days later I went back to my house and sat at the old dining room table next to the most beautiful piece of furniture in the world. Most of the time, I sat by myself. I made the best I could of life on my own. I have been with people who have been through the unexpected death of a husband or a wife or a child. One of the things I have learned is that death can stop you in your tracks. Sometimes people just stop moving. I was determined to not stop moving.

Several months passed. One night I was eating dinner by myself, reading the mail. I had received a sale brochure from the furniture store. One of the sale items was the dining room table that matched the sideboard Nancy and I had purchased in the spring.

Huh…. I sat there. What should I do? I talked with someone I know who used to work at the furniture store. What was the chance this table would be on sale again next year, or the next year? Not very likely.

So I went to the furniture store and looked at the dining room table. It was a beautiful piece of furniture. The price was very good. I decided to buy it.
Several weeks later my new dining room table was delivered. I had never seen more beautiful furniture. That night I made my favorite dinner: an enormous green salad with really good bread and cheese. I set the table and sat down to eat.

But I could not eat. I just sat there, a giant lump in my throat, tears streaming down my face. That was the moment I realized; I was completely alone. Eating at the most beautiful dining room table in the world didn’t make a dent, didn’t make a scratch in that fact. The furniture was beautiful. And the furniture was completely meaningless to me. That was the moment I realized; for me there is only thing that is actually meaningful in the world,

Furniture doesn’t matter. Cars don’t matter. Houses don’t really matter. Furniture and houses and cars do not carry meaning. They can be beautiful. We can enjoy them. But they do not carry meaning. Relationships are all that matter.

This is the message of Luke’s gospel, in our passage from chapter 12. Someone in the crowd was more concerned about claiming his share of the family fortune than about his relationship with his brother. The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Then Jesus told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced a dream. It was far too much grain for the rich man to consume. The rich man could have decided to hold a dinner at his house every Saturday and invited all of the people in the town to come and eat and get to know each other better. The rich man could have created new friendships and new relationships. The rich man could have experienced the true joy of friendship. Instead the rich man decided to keep all of the grain for himself. Then God appeared to the rich man in a dream, saying, 'You fool! This night you will die. Now what will happen to the enormous pile of grain you have saved for yourself?’"

Relationships are all that matter. This was a difficult lesson for me to understand. I’m just like everyone else. I like my new car. I am very attached to my piano. I like my house. I really liked my houses. I designed and built two of them, from the foundation to the roof.

It was only after Nancy died that I began to understand. Only one thing matters: relationships. Are we connected to one another? Are we listening to each other? Are we accommodating ourselves to each other? That is all that matters because when we are connected to one another, when we are listening to each other, there is space for love to grow. In the end, love is the only thing that matters.

Love is the only thing that will never end. Love doesn’t start with us, it starts with God. We can carry a piece of God’s love in our lives. Then it can be in the center of our relationships. That love will never end.

Love is also supposed to be the center of our relationship with God. This has been difficult for people to understand for thousands of years. People get very confused about what this God-thing is really all about.

Hosea’s people were confused about their relationship with God. Last week we heard a portion of Hosea where God appears to be going off the deep end. There is a terrible rift in the relationship between God and the people of Israel. God is going crazy because God raised these people up and led them out of slavery and nurtured them as a parent cares for a young child and then the people of Israel acted like they didn’t even know God.

So God throws a nutty back in chapter 8 of Hosea and tells them they will be punished for their complete lack of faithfulness. By the time we get to chapter 11 God is just full of grief and sadness. God says, *How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger.* God will return the people of Israel to their homes because God cares about just one thing: love. God wants to be in relationship with us.

It is easy for us to forget. It is easy for us to be confused. We are here because God has called us to make an empty space in our lives, so God’s love can enter in. That is why we are here. We are so easily distracted by the beautiful windows or the beautiful music or the comfort of this beautiful place.

We are like a family sitting down at a table for dinner. If there is love between the people the room will be filled with joy; it makes no difference how beautiful or ugly the table is or exactly how many people showed up for dinner. If there is no love between the people the room will be filled with grief or fear or anger; it makes no difference how beautiful or ugly the table is or how many people showed up for dinner.

So come to the table. Enjoy the food. Admire the beauty of the table. But remember why we are here. God’s great desire is to be in a relationship with us. God’s great desire is for us to be a family of love.