

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

I would like to share a story with you by Rebecca Manley Pippert.

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant. Kinda esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat.

The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!) By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick.

About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the deacon is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves, You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?

It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The people are thinking, *The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do.* And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor.

With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships alongside him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. There seems to not be a dry eye in the entire congregation.

When the minister finally gains control he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

In the readings, we hear about a new way of doing things. The world is about to change. How we see one another and treat one another will be transformed.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And Jesus picks up the chorus and

tells us: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

And as a part of this church community, it is inscribed on our hearts to go serve one another and go out into the larger community and bear one another's burdens and in doing so, fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). We are charged with ensuring that there is a place at our table for the Billys of the world and feeding those who enter Rebecca's Café and clothe the poor and comfort those in distress.

The concept of community has been studied and analyzed over the years and has generated numerous definitions. In 1986, two psychologists, McMillan and Chavis define a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that people matter to one another, and a shared faith that needs will be met through their commitment to be together." How successful have we been in meeting this definition? Is our table large enough to accommodate the lost and the hurting and the disheveled?

As you are aware, we are discussing a book by John Pavlovitz, [A Bigger Table](#). It is a book that goes to the heart of Jesus' declaration of servanthood. It has caused generated lively discussion and reflection. Pavlovitz provides questions to consider while reading his book. Consider this one for a moment. "What were your faith and family life like when you were a child? How big was the metaphorical table in your faith tradition?"

I have given this a great deal of thought. In my elementary school years, the church I attended was the largest Methodist church in Jacksonville. In my visiting other churches in the city, it is fair to say that they resembled one another in the composition of the church-goers. The term for the majority of the congregations was WASP. I do not remember seeing anyone outside that description in the churches I visited, including non-Protestant churches. If Billy had entered the Jacksonville church, I am afraid he would have been escorted out. Jesus' soul would have been very troubled indeed.

But the church was just one community that I was a part of and in my family community and my father's work community and my extended family community there were similarities and there were differences. My grandparents were the first "parents" to instill in me a moral compass. The Billy's of the world would hitchhike along Hwy. 301 South and come up to their house and knock on the door, hungry and tired and penniless. My grandmother without hesitation would make a meal with ice tea. After placing the food on a tray, I would deliver it to our guest, sitting on the patio, relaxing in the shade. My Grandmother always made sure there was pocket money on the tray. It was a lesson well taught and it was well received.

All of us live in multiple communities that resemble a Venn Diagram. Some of the circles may touch each other or overlap or stand alone. Pavlovitz says that when we try to enlarge the table, we will be pulled in all directions. The more we seek to be about the work of loving all people, it will really make some people very angry. He reminds the reader that Jesus' guest list did not just include his social equals but also people who were deemed unworthy. "That was the strategic beauty of his scandalous diverse guest list. By not being selective with his invitation, Jesus affirms the value of his disparate meal companions to them and to those watching from afar."

My friends, this is the way the table should appear in this community. This is the covenant that has been made with us. It has been written on our hearts. We are brought together to walk in peace to love and serve the Lord....to bring Billy into the Sanctuary, to sit down with him and lead him to the space at the table that has been reserved just for him.

Let us pray. The following is found in Dorothy McRae-McMahon's Echoes of Our Journey.

In the face of all our realities:
We are the people who heal each other,
Who grow strong together,
Who name the truth,
Who know what it means
To live in community,
Moving towards a common dream
For a new heaven and a new earth
In the power of the love of God,
The company of Jesus Christ
And the leading of the Holy Spirit. Amen