

## **WHOSE TABLE IS IT?**

**Mark 9:33-37**

**Mark 10:13-16**

**Whose table is it?**

**This wooden rectangular table is placed at the front part of Wedgewood's sanctuary. On this table we put an altar tapestry, offering plates, candles, a cross, and when we practice communion we place on it the bread and the cup.**

**So whose table is it?**

**In some congregations the table belongs to the Pastor.**

**The Pastor. The Preacher. The Minister. Priest. Teacher. Counselor. Prophet. Holy Person. Reverend. Those are the clean names. We'll leave the other ones out.**

**Shouldn't this table be the Pastor's table? After all, the Pastor is seminary educated. The Pastor has experience. The Pastor has wisdom. The Pastor knows psychology and group dynamics and church administration. The Pastor, some believe, not me, but some believe the Pastor is better at praying and discerning. The Pastor is closer to God. So the Pastor should run the church. Amen? [I didn't think I'd get any amens.]**

**What if the table isn't the Pastor's table? What if one of the problems with the modern church is that this table too often in too many churches is the Pastor's table?**

**Well, if the table isn't the Pastor's table, surely it must be the deacons table. Good old Baptist deacons. Elected by the congregation. Some times you get a bad one, a grumpy, cranky, difficult person. So someone had the brilliant idea of a rotation system. Rotate that bad deacon off. And then someone else came up with the horrible idea of life time deacons. Very bad idea. Those bad deacons seemed to live forever. And---and they thought the table was theirs.**

**Easy to see how they got confused. Deacons are ordained. Hands have been laid on them. They were told it was an honor to be a deacon. Find that scripture, would you. They were told they had to be at least a step above everyone else in the church. In certain congregations, not this one, deacons are the only ones who can distribute the bread and the cup. No wonder, no wonder they got confused.**

**Best I can tell, in most Baptist churches the table, this table, belongs to the deacons. Deacons run the church. We say we are Baptist, we say we have a congregational polity, but in reality most Baptist churches aren't even Baptist.**

**In 99.9% of Baptist churches, not in this one, Baptist deacons meet monthly and they decide, they decide who can and cannot do something. They make the decisions. They are the authorities. The table is theirs.**

**But it's not theirs.**

**I remember telling a deacon at my first church, "I don't care if you were born on this table, this church is not yours."**

**That didn't go over too well.**

**I believe most Baptist churches would be better off without deacons. I believe most churches would be better off if they had Wedgewood deacons. Here at Wedgewood we talk about deacon ministry, not the deacon board. At this church being a deacon is not an honor; it's a particular ministry in our congregation. An important ministry, but so are the others. At Wedgewood, deacons know the table is not theirs.**

**Well, if the table is not the Pastor's and it's not the deacons, my next guess is that the table belongs to the richest person or people in the congregation?**

**Have you ever noticed how the people who have money are usually the ones who run the church? This is interesting. Very interesting in light of Jesus' comment that rich people are the ones who have the hardest time being kingdom people. Actually, that's a little watered down version of what he said. Jesus actually said it was impossible for a rich person to be a kingdom person. Something like harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a big bucks person to enter the kingdom of God.**

**Why then, please tell me, why then do rich people run churches? You give the most money to the church---not the most money percentage-wise mind you but in terms of amount---and you think you own the church, but you don't.**

**Not the Pastor's table. Not the deacons table. Not money bags' table. How about the table belonging to the people who have been at the church the longest? Charter members. People who have gone to the church one zillion years. Or people related to people who were at the church in the beginning. Forget apostolic succession. We're talking church relative succession.**

**When I was the Pastor at a little country church in Chapel Hill I befriended a depressed minister who had a church south of Chapel Hill, also a little country church. He told me there were people in the congregation who had been going to the church for thirty years, for thirty years, who were still considered newcomers.**

**Whose table is it? Some people think the table is theirs because they think, I want to underscore they think, they think they are the smartest people in the congregation. Why don't we administer an IQ test to everyone and let the person who scores the highest have the table?**

**But what if we are all smart in different ways. What if we are all teachers and we are all students.**

**Whose table is it? Here's an idea. We've got ten clergy in the congregation. We could have a clergy council. After all, we've been to seminary, not to be confused with cemetery, we've been to seminary and we can tell you THE meaning of the biblical text.**

**Not really. What we can tell you is what we have learned from a scholar who wrote and said something that reconfirmed our biases. But believe me, there are other opinions.**

**Whose table is it? A lot of problems in churches are the direct result of people not knowing or remembering whose table it is. You know whose table it is, don't you? It's the Lord's table, isn't it? It's the Lord's table and his alone. And the one whose table this is not interested in loaning out the table. In fact, Jesus, we learn from our scripture lessons, is not pleased with the power plays that are going on among the disciples. They are arguing about who is the greatest. They are arguing about who is the greatest and how does Jesus respond? He says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."**

**Now the Church has messed this text up. We have a bad habit of doing that with the hard texts. And with this text we mess it up by using it for baby dedication services. The parents bring their precious child dressed in white before the church and the minister takes the baby in her arms and she says, "Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me." But when Jesus spoke those words he didn't have a baby dedication service in mind. He didn't give us a good verse for the babies so we could say, "How cute."**

**In his commentary on Mark, Ched Myers points out that children represented the bottom of the social and economic scale in terms of status and rights in the ancient Mediterranean world. In other words, to put a child in their midst after saying that the first must be last would be to provide a concrete illustration. This is what it means to be a follower of mine. Not being someone who is the greatest, but being someone who has no more status and power than a child.**

**Later Jesus says, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom like a child will not enter into it." (Mark 10:13-16) Whoever is out for status and power will not get in.**

**Today at the table we will receive the bread and the cup from two of our children. They are not at the table for us to say, "How cute!" (They are cute, though.) They are not at the table to give us warm fuzzies. They are at the table as a reminder to us that the table is the Lord's, that the church is not ours to run, that power and status can cause a lot of problems in a community of faith.**

**After receiving the bread and the cup remain at the front, form a circle. When everyone has been served we will join hands and sing "Bless be the Tie."**

**Come to the Lord's table.**