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A Feast of Life in the Shadows of Death

Have you spent time in a space that seemed to make space for you? I'm sure most of us have spent time in other places too. Either its brick and mortar or inhabitants make space disappear. You feel smaller and smaller.

1100 East 55th Street. The former site of my seminary. That brutalist architecture created so much beautiful space for me. Internally and otherwise.

I lived around those tables. Someone said, "Troy, this is like your living room!" The shadow was still there for a while. I had been living under it for years. Trepidation. It covered so much. Some of you know what it is like. When you encounter someone you do the math, how comfortable can I be around this person? How much about myself can/should I disclose? Do I have to put on a performance or can I be my own person? Do I have to put on a different persona or can I be at peace. I had forgotten what it was like to be in a *spacious* place. Or to have a seat at a table where I could feast.

Until I sat down on one of those burnt orange, well loved, chairs. Around tables spread out in the refectory I was able to learn and grow and be. Invited to feast-- during lunch. The feast wasn't about the food being served but about who was there and what it created. *Room* to relax into all that God is calling us to be. Meals paired with vulnerability, community, and love. It's like the table itself was extending and stretching out. The shadows of isolation began to lift. Fork and knife in hand. Where has an ordinary meal been transfigured into a feast for you?

No wonder, as one of my mentors reminded me, one of the roots of the Hebrew word for salvation is *spaciousness*.

Images of feasting are plentiful. Isaiah's vision is one set out for all. David sings of a table placed before his enemies. Jesus speaks of a wedding banquet and a king insistent on the feast being shared even if those who enjoy it are not who we expected.

As in the world, so in our texts: Images of death are bountiful too. There is death itself being swallowed up, the violent, murderous scenes in the gospel, and the world's own valleys where the shadow of death seems to envelope us. You know the topography. You've lived under that canopy where it's hard to get your bearings. Lost, isolated, with no room, like you are around a cramped table with nowhere to sit. One Confirmand reflects on a time for them "It really felt like

God was punishing me for something I didn't do. I felt upset, confused." Another Confirmand, "There are times where we all feel alone. Like God has abandoned us. Either we are angry at God about something bad that happened, or we are scared that God has walked out on us."

The shadow grows. Another 9th grader shares about a really dark time in their life, and the most alone they have ever felt. How about you? Death, diagnosis, disease, discord, dysfunction, disoriented.

The shadow lengthens.

Under this shadow we feel stuck. Especially when those valleys are systemic-- where sin is rampant-- where the migrant crisis exposes not only a broken immigration system, displaced priorities but also decades of disinvestment and neighborhoods left for dead. More famine than feast for what feels like forever. No room.

And-- the middle east. How will we ever get out of this shadow? Heartbreaking. No light on the horizon. You know the complexities of such compounding trauma. The terror afflicted on innocent Israelis, the blatant evil of Hamas. And Palestinian civilians-- some Lutheran, who have spent years in occupation/open air prisons now caught in the crossfire. We must speak truth about the dignity of our Palestinian sibling while standing shoulder to shoulder with our Jewish neighbors and against anti-semitism wherever it raises its ugly head.

Do you still hear the invitation to a feast? Isaiah. Jesus. The persistent king. In the tension of death lurking at every corner and the promise of a cosmic feast is where we live.

When my aunt was dying, a good friend simply invited me over for a meal. A place---*Space, room*-- to cry, to share, to lament, to be angry at God, to eat. To sit with the promises of God true amid pain. Like an extension of this very table. And the shadow lifted ever so slightly for a moment.

We gather again around the table that Christ himself spreads before us. Where we are filled with Christ. Confirmands: You belong at this table. There is space for you. There is that garment in the parable. The one that you must have to come to the banquet. Look at what you are wearing. An echo of the garment you were given in baptism. You are clothed with Christ. The only thing you need for a seat is yours forever. Nothing and no one can ever take that away. The Creed that you will confess, your faith, this community, this Eucharist, baptism you are saying yes to--- they all, with Christ himself always make space, not constrict. Space to imagine, to weep, to question, to rejoice, to struggle, to push, pull, to be, to speak out about injustice, to confront, to insist that there is enough bread and wine and grace and love for us and them-- and to grow. God's mercy is an ocean that will hold you.

From here we are sent. Invited to extend this table of resurrection around every dead end and grave that the world shuts people into. Where will you make a feast as a protest against death? Where will you set up an altar in the shadows? There we proclaim the promise of the feast. Death has been put on notice. Christ is alive. There is plenty of room in the house of God. Space that makes space. Now from our confirmands:

“Knowing this good news makes me feel safe knowing he loves us so much.”

“When people serve you and you serve others you get a sense of hope and faith because it brings joy.”

“Jesus doesn’t say, “The kingdom of God will be among you.” He says, “The kingdom of God is among you.”

“I know that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, my future is secure, and I can move forward knowing that Jesus will be by my side every step of the way. I hope that throughout my life, I can shine Jesus’ light to as many people as possible, in whatever ways God calls me to do.”