

Creative Nonfiction



On Preparing a Table

Leah Sookoo.¹

A Blessing for Tables

As we gather together,
*let us remember that this
is not just a table, but an altar,
not just a meal, but a miracle.*

*May every cup that is filled
and every plate that is used
and every seat that is warmed
be a sweet offering to you, Lord:
this, our heart, our family,
a vessel prepared for presence.*

*Come and be the water we drink
and the bread that we feast on
as we remember that this
is more than food and drink,
it is a sacred communion.*

A vase of flowers, a table set, seats empty. A meal prepared, wine and ease overflowing. Bowls full, glasses raised, the fragrance of abundance. Garden carrots, pickled plums, rhubarb, fresh cream, olive oil, black figs, pink ladies, sweetie drops, salt, bread. Maybe candles, maybe music, maybe lights dimmed. It is an innate, shared desire to gather around a bountiful harvest of intention.

The dinner table is a well-known landscape, a facet of home life and one of the earliest marks of society. From the beginning, we have gathered with our tools of worship: goblets and saucers, clay pots and ceramic plates, engraved and embellished, painted or plain. However, this social routine does not depend on lavish and ornamental objects. The only requirement is room enough for every guest, and enough to eat. Here, we lay our weapons down to take up our forks, our animosities and

¹ Leah Sookoo is a writer situated in Calgary, Alberta. Currently on sabbatical, she has taken the past year to explore and muse on topics pertaining to sabbath, spiritual landscapes, and discerning God's voice. Some previous teachings of hers can be found on the Tehillah YYC podcast. Personal essays, meditations, and poetry can be found on her Substack, On Hold. <https://onhold.substack.com/> For direct correspondence, contact her at lvsookoo@gmail.com.



obligations set aside for the ritual at hand. Here, we are no longer ravaged by insatiable demands of work and life, nor besieged by the assiduity of hurriedness. The table invites us to come to rest in the sprawl of belonging. To know that a seat has been prepared and the table has been set is to know that there is nothing more that we must do other than arrive. There is no other place that demonstrates this like the table does. The setting is universal; the symbol is conclusive. And it is for everyone: we all know how to use utensils, hold food, place it in our mouths, be fed. It's our earliest ritual, and our most instinctive habit. We must be fed; we will be fed. And God promises that we will be. *Come, all who thirst. Come, all who hunger. Recline at the table.* But you say: we shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God! Yes, but what is that word? Is it not Jesus? And what does he come to bring? Is it not a new covenant? And how does he reveal that covenant? Is it not through bread and wine? You see, they are inseparable—the spiritual and physical—and it has always been about a feast. Nourished in holy communion, without pretenses, in the simplicity of togetherness, we are demonstrating the kingdom of God.

That God's new covenant is illustrated around a table is not a delicious accident. He deliberately eschews empty gestures in favour of embodied sacramental elements. Bread and wine: tangible morsels that one can taste and touch. It is not a metaphor; it is the physical, mystical practice we perform with friends and family and foes and foreigners as an act of holy unity. Communing is to eat together and communion restores our divine identities. Our *Imago Dei*. Co-crucified with Christ, we are no longer sinners, but saints; no longer orphans, but beloved children of God. To return to the table is to return to the consciousness of who we are and who we always were. Oh, what a feast it is. The table is the centerpiece of connection and the altar of love. The Father sits at the head of the table, and we, the children, eagerly await the meal. When we ask for bread, would He give us a stone instead?

In the depth of gratitude and the fullness of hunger satiated, we are abundant. We are lacking nothing; we have everything we need. Filled to the brim. Pouring out and overflowing. In the presence of our enemies, we are safely veiled by power of connection. What is our enemy? Is it soldiers from beyond the planes? For most of us, it is not. The enemy of our society today is loneliness². It is ubiquitous across ages, and it is an epidemic of suffering caused by isolation. In crowded cities we live in small apartments without dining tables; between jobs and meetings we eat in our cars and at our desks. In our homes, we rest plates on our laps as we snack in front of screens. We have forgotten the sacred experience of luxuriating slowly over a meal, severing ourselves from the first and most basic method of connection. In a digital society, there are many benefits to how we access information, but we have been deceived into thinking we are truly connected. We have access to more people, across borders and languages, and yet somehow still we are starved for true familial affection and practices. This counterfeit for real intimacy has resulted in less time together and affects all age demographics and communities³. The solution is not profound, nor is it new. The solution is illustrated in the very verse:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

² The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation." May 2, 2023. Web. https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/connection/index.html?utm_source=osg_social&utm_medium=osg_social&utm_campaign=osg_sg_gov_vm

³ Ibid.

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How fitting that the table is a symbol for connection. It's almost as if God knew our greatest enemy would be that which keeps us afraid of coming to the very thing that will heal us.

If we are fully awake to the groanings of this world, fully present in our own sojourn through valleys, conscious of our good Father in the presence of our enemies, then we know we all ache the same way. Between the broken sinews of our own hearts, a luminous question emerges like a candle in the dark: Could you give what you want the most? Would you share the fruit of family? Would you reserve a place at your table? Would you pour out enough so that their cup would overflow? The shepherd is leading his little flock home to a place prepared for them. That place is a sanctuary for the suffering and a resting place for the lonely, where blessings spring from the soil and belonging is its first fruits. On the voyage from isolated to interdependent, from "them" to "us", from lonely to loved, this is how we shepherd the lost home: around the table, washed and fed, rested and nourished. Here, the scene is set for Heaven to come.