

We all have inspirations. Whether it is a person we admire, or a formative event that continues to influence us, or a piece of music, a work of art, or a gift of nature, there are those things in life that move us, shape us, draw us more fully into being the person we hope we might be. Music is one of those universal inspirations. More often than not, the voices that speak the most are not those within the Christian tradition (or even any religious tradition for that matter). Rather those on the periphery who are keen observers of life sing of truths that pierce us as the beauty of their music lifts us. *The Highwomen*--a band created by Brandi Carlile and including Natalie Hemby, Maren Morris, and Amanda Shires--are a recent revelation of this fact. The clip of the week is their song *Crowded Table*. Two stanzas of the refrain reverberate in my mind as helpful images for how we, as a church, are to be:

*I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone*

When it comes to tables, there is no mistaking what the church means. It is the Eucharistic Feast. The Lord's Supper. Communion. That which has been absent for so many for so long during the pandemic. The table for us is the meal that our Lord hosts, and the imagery of a crowded table is precisely how we should imagine the sacrament of the altar. There is enough. There is enough for everyone. And everyone is welcome. In essence, we want a house with a crowded table, and what a wonderful vision statement that would be for us!

What would our life together look like if this were one of the guiding principles of our community? Where some communities seek to use communion as a way to exclude, we are called to include. Where the preferences and predilections of life can begin to fray connection, the understanding week in and week out that the table that binds us is much larger than any opinion or option. Finally, if we truly desire a crowded table, there may be some work to do to invite others around this table (or a table like it in another location where people can access it). What is it that draws you to the table? Do you ever share that with others? How might a friendly invitation to participate in the meal of the table look? It's never too late to consider this, and never too late to talk to others about it. Never too late to see if the table might get a little more crowded.

The place by the fire for everyone is rich with meaning and possibility. While it is an extension of the crowded table, the fire underscores that everyone is welcome. Further in the song, this value is underscored:

*Everyone's a little broken
And everyone belongs
Yeah, everyone belongs*

Again, what if this were a vision for us of life together? Not that one needs to be perfect. Not that one should be ashamed of weakness or doubt or fear or imperfection. And certainly not that we should ever lord it over another if we feel that there is a distinction between our abilities. The common denominator is our being a little broken. Our connection is our imperfection. Our shared life is our shared clay feet. And, as the song declares, “Everyone belongs/ Yeah, everyone belongs.” What a critical reminder for us each and everyday. On the one hand, it invites us to let go of our categories and cliques and demarcations. We are invited to see the image of God in the other whom we meet and seek to understand it and honor them. On the other hand, this is a word of promise. For if everyone belongs, then we do as well. And that is worth hearing at least once a day and twice on Sunday.

The genre of music that *The Highwomen* play may not necessarily be your cup of tea. They may not be your inspiration. And, perhaps, they might. Regardless, I hope that you engage in recognizing where your inspirations come from, returning to them again and again for sustenance and strength, and finding ways to incorporate them into your spiritual practice and our life together. When you do, a bit more of the gospel is lived out, a bit more of the holy is present, and our house possesses a crowded table and a place by the fire for everyone.