

THE IRRESISTIBLE COMMUNITY

AN INVITATION TO **LIFE TOGETHER**

BILL DONAHUE

FOREWORD BY DR. HENRY CLOUD



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2015 by Bill Donahue

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Donahue, Bill, 1958–

The irresistible community : an invitation to life together / Bill Donahue ;
foreword by Dr. Henry Cloud.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1709-4 (pbk.)

1. Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Christian life.

I. Title.

BV4597.52.D655 2015

248.4—dc23

2015007076

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled CEV are from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2007

Scripture quotations labeled NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy
of the individuals involved.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



To all those who believe
that the life-changing power of a little group,
gathering in the name of Jesus,
can transform the world . . . one life at a time.

Contents

Foreword by Dr. Henry Cloud	11
Acknowledgments	15
Introduction: A Personal Invitation	17

Part 1: Join the Fellowship of the Table 23

1. Finding Your Place at the Table 27
2. Table Manners 37
3. Choose a Table, Any Table 61
4. Table Tales 85

Part 2: Practice the Ministry of the Towel 101

5. Your Towel Has a Name on It 107
6. A Dirty Towel Is a Happy Towel 123

Contents

7. Arranging Our Towels in a Circle	145
8. Don't Throw In the Towel	157
Part 3: Live in the Circle of Truth	175
9. A Hunger for Truth	179
10. Telling Ourselves the Truth	195
11. The Truth Hurts, the Truth Heals	211
12. Truth Is Dangerous	227
 Conclusion: Becoming an Answer to Prayer	 245
Notes	251

Foreword

Recently I read a review of a book on how people change and overcome longstanding patterns in behavior and life. It caught my attention because it was written by one of the most well-known researchers in the field of change. I tend to gravitate toward books that are empirically based, meaning they have solid research to back them up.

In the synopsis I was captured by one of the arguments of the book, namely, that research has proven there are well-known processes and steps to change, no matter what the change is we are trying to make. I felt a sense of alignment and familiarity with the work the author had assembled. It seemed like a pretty good collection of what the field has learned. Until . . .

As I kept reading, the author's big selling point was finally delivered. It went something like this: "What an exciting time we live in! Science has now shown us that you can change almost anything, if you know how. You don't need treatment,

therapy, or other expensive or time-consuming programs. You can change yourself!”

It caught my attention in the same way an oncoming car does. For decades I have seen people change and overcome enormous issues—but virtually never by themselves. It *always* involves others. Yet here was a heralded researcher saying the opposite.

I bought the book.

And—guess what—he was right. The principles he was writing about, and the laws, steps, and stages of the change process were well-documented across many fields of psychology, spirituality and the like. And . . . he was wrong.

Not about the research, steps, and stages of how many problems are changed, but about his central selling point: *you can do it yourself*. In virtually every chapter, every stage, every step of the program, he argued for what he called a “change community.” “Put your support and change team together. . . . Tell them what you are struggling with. . . . Get them to hold you accountable, . . . to model for you patterns that you do not know how to do, . . . to teach you what they know, . . . to correct you when you stray.” And on and on.

It was a classic “bait and switch.”

He told us what we all want to hear: “You can change just by doing these things. Do A, B, and C and your life will be different.” But then he slipped in the magic ingredient in each and every A, B, and C: *other people*.

The reality is there is no life change without community.

That is why I am so excited about this book from Bill Donahue. In it he gives us both: the methods and activities of

significant life change, *and* the most important tool God uses to help us make life work: relationship.

But he does more. Bill does not just say you have to gather in a church basement, a living room, or a jacuzzi, and “community” will happen and people will be healed. He says there are ways Jesus taught us to be together that produce the change, meaning, and growth we all long for. There are principles that guide the creation, formation, and sustaining of real community, and here he helps us well.

I have had the opportunity to work with Bill on many community-building projects over the last twenty years. I have seen his passion for this work to be real, lived out in his own life, and bear fruit wherever he goes. In this book what you are getting is not just theory, although the principles are sound. It is also field tested and lived out by the author, and those are always the best books.

The message of this book will be helpful both to you and to others you want to help. In Bill’s words, “pull up a chair and sit for a while.”

Dr. Henry Cloud
Los Angeles, CA
2015

Acknowledgments

For over twenty years I have taught the message of this book around the world, in churches, conference centers, hotel ballrooms, boardrooms, and, perhaps most importantly, in living rooms. All along the way, people shaped my thinking and sharpened my teaching, providing real-life feedback and generously sharing their experiences in community. Together we practiced the Way of Jesus in community, discovering its power, grace, and truth.

Often I found myself to be more of a learner than a teacher, and I wish I could recall all who provided insights, correction, vision, encouragement, and hope along the journey. Indeed, their fingerprints can be found on every page. So, to all who took the risk of leading, building, teaching, and living authentic life in community, patterned after the Master, I say thank you, a thousand times over.

I am forever grateful especially for those who helped me get this message on paper. My amazing wife Gail and my incredible

family put up with me when I had to retreat to “the cave” for extended periods of writing, emerging only for food and sleep. They were patient when I was overwhelmed, gracious when I was frustrated, and encouraging when I needed to press on.

Research assistants at TIU made valuable contributions. Alex Gowler provided great insights on Christian community and helped me summarize and articulate the gospel story. Tyler Howell, Derek Caldwell, and Jamie Hudson provided background studies on many of Jesus’s followers and the twelve apostles. I am grateful for encouraging feedback on the manuscript from Bill Willits, Rick Howerton, and Steve Gladen, group-life-ministry buddies for life.

I drew much-needed strength from our “familyhood” community, a group of neighbors and friends without whom I would be a bigger mess than I am. And I could never write about community life without gratitude for the Friday morning fellowship of Al, John, Jim, Tom, and Roger.

My agent at WordServe, Greg Johnson, and the staff at Baker Publishing Group collaborated to shape this project when I first shared the idea. My editor, Chad Allen, was patient during the challenging months I suffered with a serious eye condition, and provided essential feedback and counsel regarding the manuscript. Mark Rice, Heather Brewer, and Ruth Anderson brought their marketing savvy to the project and editor James Korsmo, copyeditor Melinda Timmer, and proofreaders Jennifer Jantz Estes and Jess Reimer worked their magic to refine my writing and provide much-needed fluidity and clarity.

For all these, and many unnamed others, I am more than thankful. God has been very good to me.

Introduction

A Personal Invitation

A dozen young men shuffle up the outer stairs to the second-floor doorway. Cautious anticipation and growing uncertainty dominate their emotions. They've been called to attend a very special gathering, an invitation both unexpected and certainly undeserved. They are an unimpressive group, but they arrive eagerly because this is an opportunity they simply cannot refuse.

When you receive an invitation, you size it up, deciding whether to accept or decline. Your response is sometimes determined by the event. If you're invited to the Oscars or the World Series, it would be the eighth deadly sin to refuse such an invitation. In other cases, it's not the event; it's the people. You might get to rub shoulders with a rising pop star, a great actor, an influential business leader, or a political mover and shaker.

Tonight's invitation is one of those "never say no to" offers, especially for this ragtag band of brothers. The main attraction

is the host, and every guest considers himself honored to attend. And so they come, a bit disheveled but highly motivated. They long for what you and I long for: a heartfelt connection with genuine friends, a deepening relationship with God, a way to make meaning out of all the confusion and chaos called life.

Crossing the threshold, they pause to stamp the day's dust from their sandaled feet and wipe a day's work from their glistening brows. It is barely dusk as they enter the upper room, but already the walls are awash with shadows, darting and dancing in the flickering candlelight. They are hungry, tired, and eager to get off their aching feet. You know that feeling. Your work is done; your stressful commute is finished; the kids are busy somewhere; and you can barely drag yourself across the room before you plop into a recliner and sigh.

On a nearby table rests a large bowl accompanied by an earthen pitcher filled with warm water. Draped over one corner of the table is a simple, well-worn towel. No one seems concerned that the household servant is absent or that the Master has made special preparations. They rush to their places and recline on several low couches surrounding a modest table, rising barely two feet above the floor. Blankets and pillows cover the couches, creating a comfortable, relaxing environment for a meal. They reach for bread, wine, honey, lentil soup, herbs and spices—a satisfying array of appetizers that quickly brings refreshment and lifts their spirits. In less than an hour the main entrée, a roasted lamb, will be served.

On the surface, everything in the room appears normal, and they are soon caught up in their business-as-usual conversation. But despite the familiarity, they sense something mysterious

in the air. No one can put a finger on it. They could see it in the Master's demeanor when he greeted them. They know this feeling. They have experienced it a hundred times over the past three years—the feeling that everything could change in a flash, as it did at the feeding of the five thousand, the healing of the paralyzed boy, and just days ago at the raising of Lazarus.

Anything can happen when Jesus is in the room. You never know what he will say or what he might do. But you can be sure it will be unpredictable, countercultural, and unconventional.

Jesus was an enigma in his time and still is today.

What will Jesus do?

A Night to Remember

On the Jewish calendar, tonight is the fifteenth of Nissan, redemption night, the beginning of Passover. Jews celebrate the night when death and darkness yielded to the unrelenting power of life and light. Over fourteen hundred years ago, the pain, suffering, and oppressive bondage that defined their four-hundred-year existence in Egypt gave way to healing, joy, and freedom. So each year the Hebrews gather to remember.

Tonight—in this upper room—it is a time to remember. Long before the Twelve climbed the stairs, the Master had made the customary preparations for the meal. The day before, paschal lambs were slaughtered at the temple, and families readied themselves for the Passover feast. Jesus made the preparations for their meal, but also for his death. So tonight is not simply the commemoration of an old story; it also marks the beginning of a new one.

At the heart of the celebration is the retelling of the exodus saga, when Jewish families placed lamb's blood on their doorposts so the angel of death would "pass over" their homes. Then the slain lamb was roasted and eaten, along with certain herbs and foods, each symbolic of some aspect of their captivity.

This Thursday evening inaugurates a week-long festival for the Jews, and the meal is the starting point. The instructions given to Moses had been clear: "You shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt'" (Exod. 13:8 NASB).

Only Jesus knows that the new story has already begun, the completion of what the older redemption story only foreshadowed. He "eagerly desired to eat this Passover" (Luke 22:15) with his followers, a clue that something special was in the mix. That he had mentioned leaving (and also his death) just days before this night should have yielded yet another clue. But the disciples were spiritually blind, deaf, and mute. Just like the rest of us.

So in they saunter, unaware that the stage has been set for a drama of another kind. Here they sit, much like we do at an evening meal, with empty bellies and few expectations. On the surface, their mission is as mindless and as narrow as yours and mine can be. Let's eat, retell the Passover story, and hear what the Teacher has to say about our life together.

They hope that future includes the overthrow of Rome, special honors for each of them, and a lifetime membership in this coveted inner circle with Rabbi Jesus. Surely it will be something like that. That much is certain.

Yet nothing is certain. Not when Jesus is around.

Simply Irresistible

The Messiah is on a high-stakes mission, nothing like the one the disciples have envisioned. So he must frame it in simple but compelling terms. In the moments ahead, Jesus will use some very common objects to communicate some very profound mysteries concerning the kingdom of God.

The first is a *table*. So common were tables that people hardly noticed them beyond their basic function as a workbench, a storage facility, or a feeding station. But not after tonight. Tonight the table will become something remarkable. They will never think of a table the same way again. And neither will you.

The second is a *towel*. In a surprising gesture of humility, Jesus will pick up a towel, unmask their self-indulgent thinking, and call them to a radical expression of greatness unlike any the world has seen. From this moment on, whenever they see a common household towel, they will remember. And so will you.

The third, while not an object per se, is the *truth*. In the ancient world, itinerant speakers competed for an audience, passing the hat for a few shekels to feed their families (and avoid an honest day's work). In an era void of television, the internet, coffee shops, and movie theaters, public speakers provided a major form of entertainment and education for a largely illiterate, agrarian culture. Expressions of "truth" were common—but not Jesus's kind of truth. While everyone is yawning at the remarks of yet another soothsayer, Jesus's words awaken the slumbering masses with authority, power, intrigue, mystery, and often bone-crushing reality.

Jesus uses these three common elements—a table, a towel, and the truth—and promises to change the world. He bids his

followers to do life together with spiritual depth yet practical wisdom, to become a life-changing community of people who live out his message, encourage his people, and serve his world. This new reality is what we long for. This is what Jesus offers each of us if we are willing to enter the upper room, hear his voice, and respond to his call.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his remarkable book *Life Together*, writes:

Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.¹

You and I are invited by Jesus to enter the upper room to experience fellowship with him, to watch him with the Twelve, and ultimately to experience abundant life together in his name.

His invitation is simply irresistible.

PART 1

Join the Fellowship of the Table

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve.

Matthew 26:17–20

I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.

Luke 22:15

We crave connection. We want to be known, cared for, loved, and celebrated. We long to give ourselves to something—to someone—greater than ourselves. We want a little band of brothers and sisters with whom we can do life and mission together. Unfortunately, this sense of connection is elusive for most of us. Either because of choices we've made or circumstances that surround us, we are stuck with ourselves, just ourselves. We stand alone facing the world. And it doesn't feel very good.

We want to be in a place where no one stands alone. We want community. I want community and cannot imagine life without it. I find it in my relationships with my family, in neighborhood gatherings, and in a little band of brothers who huddle together early Friday mornings to share life, talk truth, and encourage one another. These communal relationships call me to a higher place, beyond the world of self and toward God's greater purposes.

Canadian writer Jean Vanier is an expert on the subject of doing life together. As founder of the L'Arche communities for the mentally and developmentally disabled, Vanier has come to understand the absolute necessity of community life for

producing durable personal and spiritual growth. Depending on one another for growth and support is essential not only for those with mental challenges or physical disabilities but also for each person who desires to walk in wholeness in the kingdom of God.

Vanier explains why today, more than ever, we long for a rich, deep experience in community:

When families and tribes were well knit together, people were not lonely. . . . Today the discipline of the family and neighborhood group, with their sense of belonging, have been lost, and personal freedom has increased.

This has led to extreme individualism, but it can also give rise to a deeper search for community and belonging, oriented towards the development of personal consciousness rather than its suppression. . . . “I have come to believe,” writes David Clark, “that without a strong sense of community human beings will wilt and begin to die. Community is the foundation of human society, the zenith of interdependence, the epitome of wholeness; in fact, the end of our journeying. As Parker Palmer writes: ‘Community means more than the comfort of souls. It means, and has always meant, the survival of the species.’ Without a continuing and enriching experience of community, as well as a vision of its glory to keep us moving forward, all of us eventually perish.”¹

The table is perfectly suited to foster authentic Christlike community among people of all ages, backgrounds, creeds, and colors. Jesus was a table builder—literally and spiritually. As the son of Joseph the carpenter, he likely constructed tables of all shapes and sizes, for all purposes and occasions. As the Son

of God, a member in the divine community, he invites us to the fellowship of the table. That is what God does for his people, in times of joy, in times of sorrow, and even in our most troubled hours. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Ps. 23:5). Christ is present at the table. The author of community is both a table maker and a table host.

While an invitation to table fellowship with Jesus sounds wonderful, questions arise:

May anyone sit at the table, or are there some who are excluded?

Are there rules for behavior? How do we treat one another?

What kind of environment must be created so that the table experience is meaningful and healthy?

There are different tables for different purposes in the everyday world. Are there different tables for different purposes in the kingdom?

Every table has a story. How do we tell our story in a way that connects with each person’s story and, most important, with God’s story?

Let’s address these questions and grasp the profound transformation that takes place at the table of Jesus and at every table experience we have as we build community together.



Finding Your Place at the Table

I'm still not sure I fit in, even after three years. The only one who really cares about me—the only one who can forgive my past and the damage I've done—is Jesus. On that day at the tax collector's booth, something about him said “Come” when others clearly bid me “Go,” shaking their fists in my face and the dust from their feet.

Tax collectors forage around at the bottom of the religious food chain, but he didn't seem to care. When everyone wanted my head on a platter, he gave me a seat at the table.

I'll never forget it. Jesus sent shock waves through the crowd gathered at the water's edge. I had no business being anywhere near a rabbi, so I kept my distance, hovering nervously at the very back of the large, awestruck crowd whom Jesus was teaching. Though I could barely hear him, I hung on every word. He was stunning.

Later, some young men lowered a paralyzed friend through the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching in a last-ditch attempt to see him healed. And Jesus healed him! That miracle mesmerized the crowd and galvanized Jesus's enemies against him. I would have loved to have seen it up close, but I could never go anywhere near such a house. People despised me. I made my living making other people miserable, taxing many of them beyond what they could bear.

To my shock, Jesus and the crowd headed straight for me after that healing. I can still feel the terror. I could see in their faces they wanted revenge against me, against the authorities, against everything I represented. They had seen a healing; now they wanted a lynching.

He arrived at my booth and paused for what seemed like hours as the crowd fell deadly silent, straining to hear every word. Not one sandal moved. Not one eye blinked.

Then he spoke: "Follow me."

Those two words changed my life, redirected my career, and turned my reputation in the community upside down. They were the two most beautiful words I had ever heard. Somehow I knew he meant something much weightier than two mere words could ever convey. There were no strings attached. No "First beg for mercy, then clean up the moral mess in your life!" None of that.

At first I thought I needed to earn his favor. In my world, everything had to balance. Everything had to net out. If someone gave you something, he wanted something in return. But with Jesus it was all plus and no minus. Just "Follow me! Join my inner circle. Become one of my closest followers and friends." It was not only a shock to me but also a stunning turnaround for onlookers and a slap in the face to self-righteous rule keepers.

If Jesus says I belong, I somehow have to believe it. I'm not sure the others feel the same. Simon the Zealot still scares me.

Frankly, I find it hard even to turn my back to him. Yet I also see his heart has been softening. He's not the same as when we first came together. None of us is the same.

The mood tonight is a little more somber than Passover usually is at my home. But for now, I am simply glad to be at the table. It is good to belong.

I am Matthew.

We Long to Belong

Like Matthew, you and I long to belong. We have an innate desire to fit in and feel good about ourselves as we do life in the company of others. The good news is that a virtually unlimited supply of places are at our disposal—from sports clubs to church groups, from neighborhood bars to local business associations. While some expressions of belonging stray far from the norm, they nonetheless function as examples of our craving for community. Examples include the Pork Belly Ventures bicycle club in Iowa, Star Trek conventions, Lord of the Rings fan clubs, and the American Cheese Society. (I wonder if half the members of the cheese society are cardiologists looking for new clients.)

Studies in the social sciences confirm the universality of wanting to belong and the benefits we reap from being part of a meaningful community, especially if faith is a factor. For example, one article notes that people are typically healthier if they are connected to a religious group. “A growing number of studies indicate that people who are religious have better physical and mental health than individuals who are less involved in religion. . . . Although a number of factors are undoubtedly

involved, a basic premise . . . is that church-based social support may have something to do with it.”¹

This finding is probably not surprising to Christians. As communal beings made in the image of the Triune God, we long to connect and be known. The more we give ourselves to one another, the more we are fully human, fully alive, and fully expressing who we are as God’s unique creation. Said another way, “To be human is to be a participant in a caring community.”²

But despite our desire to belong and our need for deep relationships, few of us are satisfied with our experience in spiritual community.

So here are a few questions to ponder as we begin our journey:

Do you feel fully alive? Do you find yourself with many acquaintances but very few deep, life-giving relationships?

How would you characterize the quality of your friendships?

Do you have a place to belong?

Has anyone invited you to be part of a community?

Do you believe that you have something to offer a community of people?

If you didn’t show up to your regular church service next week, would anyone notice? Would anyone care?

If you are part of a small group that meets regularly, is your motivation to attend tinged with a sense of obligation or guilt or perhaps sheer desperation?

Do you need that group, and does that group need you?

Are you willing to carve out a way of life that involves deep connections with others and greater intimacy with God?

If some of these questions resonate with you, make you uncomfortable, or cause you to reflect deeply about the quality of your life, then keep reading. The level of your spiritual, emotional, and even physical health relates directly to the quality of communal life you experience.

You long for a full and satisfying life. I know I do. And I know that some of life will happen to us and some will happen because of us. We have little or no control over what comes our way—special gifts, joys, people, opportunities, trials, losses, illnesses, accidents, the words and actions of people in our world. But we have been given the responsibility and the opportunity to shape other parts of this life God has given us, including the kind of work we choose, where we live, whom we will marry or whether we will remain single, decisions we make concerning time and money, the people we choose to be part of our lives, and the places where we will belong. It is this last aspect—our communal life—that I want to focus on, because it has so much influence on almost every other area of life.

Let's begin with the primary place where most people find a sense of belonging. It has existed in every culture throughout history and played a significant role in the New Testament church community. Around it people prayed, laughed, cried, learned, played, sang, and—of course—shared daily meals. That place is the table.

Pull Up a Chair

In first-century Jewish culture, people found their place to belong in their family or tribe and as part of the local community. There

were really no equivalents to our coffee shops, pubs, community libraries, or local restaurants. People met others in the temple, in a synagogue, or at an outdoor gathering. But most of the time they met in a home, where the table became a symbol of hospitality, acceptance, and friendship. There people found simple food, quality friendship, and occasional fun. Owners of large homes often opened the doors to outsiders after the evening meal so that others could share in the entertainment being provided. They didn't go down to the theater; the theater came to them.

Unfortunately, the table also became a place for separating the powerful, the wealthy, and the beautiful from the weak, the poor, and the undesirable. Seats at the table were assigned by proximity to the host; the more prominent you were, the closer you sat to the host. Many were not invited at all, and some were not even welcome when the doors were opened to the broader community. That list included the usual suspects: lepers, prostitutes, the lame, all kinds of "sinners," and (always near the bottom) tax collectors like Matthew. But Jesus never viewed the table the way others did. Brennan Manning elaborates:

Through table-fellowship Jesus ritually acted out his insight into the Father's indiscriminate love—a love that causes his sun to rise on bad people as well as good, and his rain to fall on the honest and the dishonest alike (Matt. 5:45). The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table-fellowship, is the most dramatic expression of the message of the redeeming love of the merciful God. . . .

Jesus' sinner-guests were well aware that table-fellowship entailed more than mere politeness and courtesy; it meant peace, acceptance, reconciliation, fraternity.³

Peace, acceptance, reconciliation, brotherhood, and sisterhood are found at the table of Jesus. People desperately want their groups, communities, and churches to feel more like this.

The human longing for table fellowship is expressed in every generation. Emerging adults today have a particular desire for smaller expressions of community. In *Finding Faith*, Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller describe this longing:

The desire for a small community within which they are known, are active, and to which they are responsible is a consistent desire for these young people. In some cases this almost becomes a total world, in that they seem to be spending the majority of their time in or at the church. But in general, the desire to be known and to know other parishioners in an intimate way, and to be a part of a spiritual family, is the primary theme expressed.⁴

For Jesus, the great Physician, the table is a healing place—a place for sharing stories, offering hope, extending forgiveness, and pursuing reconciliation. It does not matter who you are or where you're from; all are welcome at Jesus's table. Matthew found a place to belong there, and you will as well. I know some of you cannot believe that. Your experiences at various tables in your life have not always been positive. Sadly, the table has become a place of conflict, isolation, rejection, shame, and even abuse. Whether it's the lunch table at school, the boardroom table at the office, the dinner table at home, or even the fellowship table at church, tables can be a pretty scary place to sit. Few tables have anything in common with Jesus's table, and that is heartbreaking.

Today, as he did in the upper room, Jesus comes and changes all of that. He invites us to join him at his table. He extends compassion, provides healing, speaks truth, extends love, creates safety, lends a listening ear, and inspires with challenging ideas.

Will you accept the invitation? For Matthew and the other apostles, it was irresistible.

Dinner for Two . . . and More

My family planned a small surprise for my wife's birthday. We invited her to a local restaurant for dinner. It was not an extravagant or unique dining experience. Actually, it was pretty basic because this was not one of those "significant" birthday years ending in a zero.

We ate a modest, enjoyable meal and arrived home a few minutes before the surprise took place. No exotic jewelry, no cantankerous characters shouting, no fireworks display. The surprise was simply a constant and delightful trickle of close friends arriving for dessert. First one or two entered, then a few more, then another couple, then a handful, and soon about twenty had arrived. Each time someone walked in the door, my wife turned to me, grinned, and gave me that "OK, you little schemer!" sort of look, which I relished throughout the evening. What began as a small gathering became a larger one, much to everyone's delight. It was a joy to honor my amazing wife in this way because relationships are the most profound and beautiful gifts you can give her. (Of course, a little jewelry and a trip to Hawaii would always be welcome!)

Matthew, who felt he belonged nowhere, experienced this same elation when Jesus chose him to join the inner circle, but on a much grander scale. He was so captivated by the invitation to join the new community Jesus was forming that he decided to have a party and invite his friends. While my guest roster for Gail included respectable friends and family, Matthew's list was a who's who of some of the worst characters in the neighborhood. But it did not matter. An invitation to table fellowship with Jesus was simply irresistible. Matthew, who is called Levi in Luke 5:29–32, sent out the invites.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

I love that question: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" They cowardly asked Jesus's followers because they were unwilling to confront Jesus directly. He provided the answer they probably dreaded: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Imagine Matthew running through the streets inviting his local IRS buddies to dinner (in those days, IRS stood for "Israeli Rip-off Squad"). Each one travels to the dinner party with a mixed sense of wonder, anxiety, excitement, and cautious optimism. Soon these feelings turn from caution to enthusiasm

as one by one they discover fellow tax collectors entering the room. There they hang out with Jesus, eating, drinking, and talking with him. Imagine the irony of the moment—the roaring laughter of tax collectors mixing with the rising indignation of the Pharisees. That even tax collectors discovered they had a place at Jesus’s side is a beautiful picture of what community life in the kingdom looks like.

There’s a seat for everyone at Jesus’s table. Everyone is welcome. And Jesus loves every minute of it.

Sorry, but All Our Tables Are Full

Almost any kind of dinner invitation evokes a sense of excitement and joy. That’s because it usually means a free meal. But beyond that, it simply feels good to be invited. On the other hand, how painful it is when you’re the only one *not* invited; you feel the awkwardness, rejection, shame, and anger welling up inside. Perhaps you lack the proper family pedigree, or come from the wrong ethnic group, or have a poor academic record, or just never got enough votes from “the committee.” No one wanted Matthew in the room, let alone at the table—no one except Jesus, who had a particular fondness for sinners in general and wayward tax collectors in particular (the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10 comes to mind). Jesus accomplished much of his earthly ministry at tables of every kind, and when he invited Matthew to the table, Matthew was so excited that he just had to throw a dinner party.

Come to the table. Christ has made the preparations. He has given the invitation. And there is a seat waiting for you. Come!