

TABLE TALKS

A Ritual for Facilitating Difficult Conversations: Love Feast Version

© 2018 Liturgy by Dr. Marcia McFee, www.marciamcfee.com
Originally commissioned by the Greater Northwest Area of the United Methodist Church
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Script for Facilitator, Song Leader and Musician

[There is a center table among the other tables already set with tablecloth, basket of bread, bowl of grapes cut into clusters on napkins, large pillar candle surrounded by stones and the Covenant. Each table has all items except the bread and grapes in a basket - the baskets and bowls of grapes for each table are on the center table as well and someone from each group will come to get them after setting their table. See the "Tips for Facilitation" document for further set-up instructions.]

MOVEMENT 1

The Story Begins

from the Gospel of Matthew

[the song leader leads the people in humming the tune of "Amazing Grace" once and then the piano continues to softly and slowly play under the following words (pianists, please see instructions for underscoring in the "Tips for Preparation" document)]

Reader 1: On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover meal?" He replied, "Go into the city, to a certain man, and say, 'The teacher says, "My time is near. I'm going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" The disciples did just as Jesus instructed them. They prepared the Passover.

Facilitator: Let us prepare our tables. You will find a folded tablecloth and a basket of items on your table. Please lay the cloth and place the items on the table. Send one person to the center table to light your candle from the Christ candle here.

[as the accompaniment to "Amazing Grace" continues, the people put the cloths on their tables and set it with a candle lit from the center. There are also enough river stones for each person to have one and one paper with the covenant for conversation on it. When all is set the music ends.]

Reader 2: That evening he took his place at the table with the twelve disciples. As they were eating he said, "I assure you that one of you will betray me."

Deeply saddened, each one said to him, "I'm not the one, am I, Lord?" He replied, "The one who will betray me is the one who dips his hand with me into this bowl. The Human One goes to his death just as it is written about him. But how terrible it is for that person who betrays the Human One! It would have been better for him if he had never been born." Now Judas, who would betray him, replied, "It's not me, is it, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You said it."

"Amazing Grace" vs 1

**Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.**

The Call

Facilitator: Let us join in the Call.

Reader 3: When we have a problem,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 4: When we are hungry,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 5: When we have a disagreement,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 6: When we want to get some work done,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 7: When we want to worship in the Spirit of Christ,
Bring us to this table.

- *By William J. Everett*

[short 4 measure musical intro]

**'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!**

Facilitator: The gathered Body of Christ, like those first disciples, breaks bread together no matter what. We don't have to all be in agreement or have the same perspectives on everything in order to have a place at the table. Jesus knew as he gathered his loved ones around him that, despite their connection as chosen family, there was discord and difficulty. He knew that some would betray and some would deny him. And he knew there was certainly not one mind about how they should handle the circumstances they found themselves in that last week.

Each person sat around that table with their own fears,
their own experiences, their own doubts.

And Jesus also knew that even and especially in that kind of circumstance,
we need to share food that will sustain us for the road ahead.

[short 4 measure musical intro]

**Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come:
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.**

Facilitator: We gather here today knowing that God provides unbounded grace and calls us to also be grace-full with each other. We can create safety for tender conversations by remembering that each one is precious in God's sight and each one of us is on a journey, though perhaps at different places along the road. Being grace-full with each other means providing a shield against judgment that can hurt. In our time today, we make a covenant to bind us together for good and not ill. I invite you to read the words to the Covenant there in your worship guide silently to yourselves.

[pause to allow this to happen...]

Covenant

We gather around the table acknowledging God's unbounded grace for all. We come from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities and we acknowledge our differences of opinion and perspectives on many matters. Yet we gather still, knowing that Jesus calls us to break bread and share the cup no matter what, and that each of us has a place here.

And so, as we gather around the table I commit to:

- 1) **Stay curious.** I come with a willingness to learn and commit to staying at the table. When the going gets rough, I will turn to wonder, ask questions and stay engaged.
- 2) **Be kind.** There will be statements shared at the table that will challenge my perspectives. I will be respectful in my responses and engagement, treating each one with grace and love.
- 3) **Listen with the same amount of passion with which I want to be heard.** In the words of St. Francis, I will seek to understand more than to be understood. I also commit to share the air and not dominate.

Facilitator: You have on the table a rock for everyone. I invite you to take up a rock and hold it in your hand—and if it helps to focus, close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. Rocks can represent many things. They can be hurled in ways that hurt but they can also be stepping stones to help traverse difficult passages. Rocks are also hard and can represent the hard things we sometimes have to face—like a lump in the

throat or the stomach when we feel nervousness or fear. I invite you to feel the rock in your hand and contemplate what it might mean to you in this moment.

[pause for reflection... pianist plays another verse of Amazing Grace softly, slowly]

Facilitator: Now I invite you to place your stone on the copy of the Covenant in your Guide as a sign that whatever you are feeling is in a container of safety if we are graceful with each other in this time. Let us read aloud our Covenant.

[read together, then sing]

**The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.**

Facilitator: The table of the Last Supper was only one of many tables that were instrumental in Jesus' ministry. I invite someone from each table to come up and get a basket of rolls and a bowl of grapes from the center table. *[Continue reading as they do so - unless assistance is needed]* We remember the wedding feast at Cana and the feeding of the 5,000. We remember also that he had a habit of bringing people to the table who were not likely dinner companions. We remember Levi and Zaccheus, despised tax collectors. We remember Pharisees and we remember the women—Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene and his mother Mary. Jesus also used stories about tables to teach about right relationship and accepting God's invitation to hospitality: compelling people to come off the street to a festival meal and welcoming the wayward prodigal son home with a feast.

And so, it is right, and a good thing,
whenever we gather around tables,
to give thanks to the God who formed us out of
holy dust and gave us breath and life.

[to the tune of Amazing Grace]

**Praise God, praise God, praise God, praise God,
Your love is strong and true!
Blessed is the One who comes to us.
Praise God, praise God, praise God!**

Long before Holy Communion was formalized in worship, the early church gathered around tables pot-luck style! It was called an *agape* meal. These diverse early church communities would bring and share what they had with each other, making sure all had enough.

They would remember the stories of Jesus at the table,
and they remembered the mission of Jesus so that they could remind themselves of
their own mission and the reason for their gathering.

Reader 8: They remembered that God's Spirit anointed Jesus
to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
and to announce that the time had come
when God would save God's people.

Reader 9: They would remember Jesus' invitation to "go and do likewise"—
to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and eat with the stranger.

Facilitator: Indeed, Jesus' ministry was focused on those who were suffering.
He touched those considered unclean. He healed those considered forever damaged.
He proclaimed a new day for those who felt they had no future.
He showed us how to be in ministry.

I invite you to take the Sharpie pen and write a word on your rock that represents what
you hope the church will do for the least of this world. For instance, the word might be
love, hope, feed, comfort... or any other word that is on your heart.

[music plays as this is done... when all have finished, continue]

Will you lift aloud the words you have written right from your seats,
popcorn-style?

[music ends as the people lift aloud their words]

These things we have named are the fruits by which we pray the church will be known.

I invite you place your rock back around the candle and to pass the bowl of grapes
around the table. Each person can take a cluster of grapes resting on a napkin and also
take a chunk of bread as well.

[music begins under this action and then all sing together to the tune of Amazing Grace]

**Come near, O God, and touch our hearts
through food and love this day.
Be with us now as you were then.
We open to your way.**

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, encountered a group on a ship sharing simple
food together and offering testimonies of God's love. He loved this ritual so much that
when he got to America, he started this tradition called a "Love Feast."

These became so popular that people would come from miles around to be with each other, to sing, hear testimonies and to share simple food as the early church did. Sharing our hearts around the table is part of our Christian, and our Methodist, heritage.

A Love Feast is different than communion in that
you can eat the *entire* chunk of bread in many bites if that is required,
and *all* of the grapes if you want!

A Love Feast celebrates the abundance of love and grace at work in us through the Spirit and the abundant hospitality of Christ as we share with each other.
I invite you to eat your bread and grapes as you answer this question around the table with a few words, a phrase or a sentence from each person:

*“Where do you see the Spirit of God at work in your life,
in this community
or in this world?”*

As an example, you might say... “I see God at work in the people who care about me;” or “I see the Spirit moving in our church through our worship;” or “I see God when I see people helping each other after a tragedy.”

[allow some time for this to happen... no more than 30 seconds per person. Music begins to play to indicate that the sharing time is over]

I invite you to stand if you are comfortable doing so for a prayer.
I invite you to connect with a neighbor by placing a hand on a shoulder or holding hands or touching elbows... whatever is comfortable for you.

[pause for this to happen]

Let us pray:
Graceful God,
may this sharing of food and love
be a foretaste of the heavenly pot-luck to come
where we will feast with Jesus at one table!
We pray this through your Son Jesus Christ
with the Holy Spirit in your holy church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty God,
now and forever!

[sung with strength]

**When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
than when we first begun!**

Facilitator: The scriptures say that after the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples, they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives where Jesus would set himself apart and pray, knowing that hard times were ahead. My friends, I invite you to a moment of silence. You have shared food with those at your table. Would you take a moment, in your own way, to offer a silent prayer for those who surround you, that we might all feel held in the embrace of the Christ who challenged his disciples to a deeper connection to God and to one another and invites us now to that same task.

Silent Prayer

[when enough time has passed, the piano comes back in with a verse of "Amazing Grace" and comes to a quiet conclusion. Invite the people to sit.]

Kitchen Table Conversations

Facilitator: Jesus invites us to tables of conversation and relationship, whether that be the communion table or the kitchen table. At every table, we acknowledge the brokenness and grace present. We all come to conversations differently based on our different cultural experiences from an early age, especially those conversations where we might not all agree. What was it like around your "kitchen table?" In other words, in your upbringing, how was conversation and conflict handled? We have cultural expectations about whether and how we will deal with conflict. Further, we have familial subcultural patterns that affected our sense of whether it was safe or acceptable or right to address conflict and have difficult conversations.

[Give an example from your own experience here... for instance, when I led this ritual I talked about how fighting was something you "didn't do" in my family of origin so when tensions did arise and my parents split, the thought was formed in me the fear that all disagreement leads to the extreme of divorce... which of course is not always true, as I have learned through many hours of therapy and learning to embrace discomfort!]

If you are willing, would you offer a glimpse to those at your table of something having to do with these questions:

What was it like to deal with conflict in your family of origin?

How did you learn to deal (or not) with conflict?

How are you handling conflict in a similar or different way today?

Please keep your share to about 3 minutes so that everyone that wants to has a chance to speak. You will hear a chime at the end of every three minutes. This is your indication to wrap up your share and pass the cup to the next person. You *always* have the choice to "pass" if you are not ready to share. When everyone else has shared, if anyone who has passed now feels ready to share, you can go back to them. In this round, you are invited to simply listen with no verbal response except for the group to say "thank you" after each share.

[Facilitator keeps time and uses a small chime or bell to indicated a 3-minute mark until all persons have shared... (allow about 30 seconds before you start the timer again to give time for people to finish their share)]

Facilitator: Thank you for sharing something of yourself with others. This is a gift we give to one another that furthers understanding and empathy.
Did it feel like the words of the Covenant were respected?
Take a few minutes to reflect together about the sharing.

[use the chime/bell to bring people back after about 5 minutes]

MOVEMENT 2

The Conversation Continues

Facilitator: Today we will have an experience at table talk. Imagine this as a discussion around the dinner table. We are gathered to hear one another, in safety and love. We are exploring meaning, not a decision of who's right or who's wrong. My/our job as a facilitator is to make this conversation easy and meaningful. The purpose of this movement is to allow you to experience a conversation over a difficult topic with a group. Let us begin by reminding ourselves of our Covenant, reading the three points together:

Reminder of the Covenant

I commit to:

- 4) **Stay curious.** I come with a willingness to learn and commit to staying at the table. When the going gets rough, I will turn to wonder, ask questions and stay engaged.
- 5) **Be kind.** There will be statements shared at the table that will challenge my perspectives. I will be respectful in my responses and engagement, treating each one with grace and love.
- 6) **Listen with the same amount of passion with which I want to be heard.** In the words of St. Francis, I will seek to understand more than to be understood. I also commit to share the air and not dominate.

Please insert your own questions or prompts here that you will invite people to talk about. One of the things I loved about how this happened in our setting is that each person was given a beautiful little journal to write in as they came to the event. They were invited at the beginning of each time of sharing around their tables to take a few minutes of silent reflection/journaling on the prompt before launching into the group discussion. This was wonderful for allowing some time to settle, to give extroverts a time to think before speaking, and to give introverts the chance to get their thoughts going before the pressure of verbalizing.

[at the end of your set of discussion questions, continue...]

Take another few minutes of silence to reflect on this experience. Write in your journal. What happened with you? What changed or moved in the group? Where were moments of comfort or discomfort? What did this experience mean to you and to the group?

[take 3 minutes]

MEAL

[This experience involved actually eating a meal together at this point. If you are not allowing time for that, skip this part and move to Movement 3]

I hope that this approach to a facilitated conversation has deepened your connections with each other and given everyone an opportunity to share stories and perspectives about these questions. We are going to break now for [lunch/dinner] and a time to continue spending time together and getting to know each other better. Before we break...let's bless the food that we will be sharing. *[Offer a prayer and instructions for the meal as well as the timeframe for reconvening for Movement 3]*

MOVEMENT 3

Closing Ritual

[pianist begins to play "Amazing Grace" softly under the next words]

Facilitator: As we bring our time to a close,
we return to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Reader 10: Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "Abba, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me..."

Facilitator: We may feel very different things right now, perhaps hopeful, perhaps not. Even Jesus had a reckoning moment where he wished that the pain associated with disappointment, grief, fear and unknowing would pass from him. But he finished his sentence with, "yet not what I want but what you want."

I invite you to hum the tune of "Amazing Grace" as we pass the table copy of the Covenant around our table, a sign that both things can be true—we can feel like we want to leave the conversation and have the covenantal cup pass from our responsibility but we also know that we are not alone in this—
that God is present and we can hold the responsibility together.

[the Covenant is passed and the tune is hummed]

Reader 11: Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Reader 12: Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “Abba, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words... “Abba, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

Facilitator: I invite you to take up the rock you wrote on and take it with you to make one large circle in this room *[pause for this to happen]*. Pass your rock once to your right *[pause for this to happen]*. This is a sign that we each sit, as the disciples were famous for talking about, “at the right hand” of each other, supporting one another not in spite of our differences, but because that’s what Christ did... sat and ate with especially those who were different. Take this rock home with you and place it somewhere as a reminder to continue to be in prayer for each other and for this church.

I invite you now to come close to the center table in a “clump” (not side by side). *[pause for this to happen]* What is “bubbling up” in your right now? What words or phrases or sentences would you want to lift up as learnings or discovery or wisdom from your table conversations that you would want to share for the good of the whole group?

[allow time for this to happen]

Facilitator: Let us pray:
Holy and Loving God,
our eyes are heavy and yet we hear your call to stay awake in these days.
Help us to stay and to pray.
We know that what feels like death
can indeed be a path to resurrection with Christ.
And all God’s people said, “**Amen.**”

[sing with energy – people may not have their Participant Guides so you may need to read the words to this verse before you sing]

**Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease:
I shall possess, within the veil,
a life of joy and peace.**

Facilitator: Go in peace to set tables of love wherever you go.

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