

LEONARD SWEET

FROM *tablet*
TO *table*

where community is found
and identity is formed



“*From Tablet to Table* speaks to the heart of God’s purpose for humankind—namely, relationships. First, that we will commune with God Himself; and second, with one another. There is no better place to build relationships than at the table with good food and great conversation. *From Tablet to Table* is a great read for those who want to develop their friendship with God and other people.”

GERARD LONG

Executive Director, Alpha USA

“Oh, this is a must-read for anyone who, like me, longs for the table to return to the center of our family lives—and the center, indeed, of our faith and practices. Len Sweet is singing a song I love, and he’s doing it with intelligence and passion.”

SHAUNA NIEQUIST

Author of *Bread and Wine*, shaunaniequist.com

“The table is a recurring biblical theme that Len Sweet engages deeply in *From Tablet to Table*. That’s Len’s way—he makes us think through signs, stories, and symbols—and he has done so again here. This book will make you think and will stretch your thinking, in classic Sweet fashion. I’ll see you at the table.”

ED STETZER

Executive director, Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College

“Leonard Sweet is among the few Christian writers of our time whose every work should be carefully read. In this new offering, Sweet reframes the Scriptures from a static tablet of ink to a full menu of spiritual food for the human soul and spirit. This is an engaging study on the meaning of ‘the table’ throughout Scripture and on how it applies to every hungry and thirsty heart today.”

FRANK VIOLA

Bestselling author, speaker, and blogger, frankviola.org

“In our fast-paced/fast-food/ramen-noodle/instant/disposable-ideas culture, isn’t it dreamy to find that our longing for ‘something more’ isn’t a coding error but a spiritual hardwiring? Len Sweet calls us to return to the elemental fundamentals: a table, a meal, a conversation, a conversion. He brings his unique gumbo of narrative/metaphor/humor/observation/relationship and draws us into new observances of ancient truths. If you’re looking for something tasty to sink your teeth into, start here. Len has word-chef’d a soul-savory delight.”

ANITA RENFROE

Comedian, anitarenfroecom.com

“Len Sweet has always had one of the most fertile minds of the people I know. In this book, he continues in this Sweet tradition by adding lots of spice to our dulled imaginations as well as calling us to party for the sake of the gospel. What’s not to like?”

ALAN HIRSCH

Founder of Future Travelers and of Forge Mission Training Network, alanhirsch.org

“With his reflections on the Lord’s table and the dinner table as central for Life and life, Len Sweet draws together heaven and earth in a celebration of the ongoing relationships of love. This is a splendid theology to live by.”

LUCI SHAW

Author of *Adventure of Ascent: Field Notes from a Lifelong Journey*,
lucishaw.com

“Leonard Sweet is right when he says that if we brought back the table as a sacred object of furniture in every home, church, and community, it would change the world for the better. This small treatise on eating invites readers to think differently and more intentionally about something we do multiple times a day.”

LISA GRAHAM McMINN

Author of *Walking Gently on the Earth*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

EVERY BOOK I WRITE IS a rock thrown into the water. I heave and trust heaven, hoping that God will create a wave of beauty, truth, and goodness, a wave that rolls on and on, reaching out to the ends of the earth and deep into the spirit of humanity. I am here because of waves from rocks hurled into the ocean by ancestors both biological and theological, some of whose names I know and celebrate, some of whose names I will know only in eternity. The greatest wave comes from the rock Christ threw with his life long ago, the Wave that shook the world like a tsunami shakes a shore.

I am not the first to find the table a fertile metaphor. Without the surgical skills of David Zimmerman, my editor on this project, this book would have died on

the table. Whatever circumstances and challenges arose while I was writing this book, Lori Wagner was adept at turning the tables so that it resulted in my advantage, not my disadvantage. My friend Chuck Fromm, and his right arm and left brain Suzie Stablein, are gracious in tabling things in their own lives to deal with my entreaties and importunities. Brett Blair keeps my shortcomings under the table as we conspire to improve the art and craft of preaching.

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Completion of this book was not made possible by grants from any foundation or learned society or confederacy of funding. Rather, Don Pape believed in this book enough to leave money on the table. When my life's water-table level went down, my family kept

me from trouble and managed to find ways to replenish the supply. Being in the presence of Thane, Soren, and Egil are the highwater marks of my life. Elizabeth has been a fundamentalist table setter, even when it was easier to herd cats than to herd kids to the table. The table is her love language, and this book is really the life lessons of her table turned into a tablet.

This book grew from a sermon I first preached at the One Project in Seattle, which I attended with my son Thane at the invitation of Japheth Oliver. I then preached the sermon at the Family Fest in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, at the invitation of Bill and Gloria Gaither. No one has done more to spread a sumptuous table for the church in the past fifty years than Gloria and Bill. In fact, Gloria may just be one of the church's best living theologians. It is to these two master setters of the table in the home, the church, and the world that I dedicate this book.

Leonard Sweet

Orcas Island

Labor Day weekend, 2014

INTRODUCTION

BRING BACK THE TABLE



*You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.*

GEORGE HERBERT, "LOVE (III)"

WHEN ANY SPECIES UNDERGOES a reproduction crisis, a name is given it: "endangered." Arguably Christianity has entered such a crisis; our inability to reproduce the faith is the number one problem facing our families and churches today. Christianity in the West has become a sterile, exhausted religion, its power to tell us fresh things about God and life expended in lifeless repetition, imprisoned conventionality, and predictable pastiche. The result is a failure to offer a viable response to the challenges facing the world we're in.

The dominant means of addressing the church's

reproduction crisis has been to devise new methodologies and strategies for how we do church. This is a misdiagnosis of the problem, however, and without the right diagnosis of the disease, a cure is difficult. Or to put it differently, a category mistake is a catastrophic mistake. And our condition is now catastrophic.

Christianity in the West is suffering from an identity crisis. Instead of finding our identity in Jesus, we have tried to build an alternative identity on a Christian worldview, on biblical values, or on Christian principles, as though these are the cure-alls for our deteriorating faith and declining condition. But none of these salve our fear and confusion about who we are and help us to feel joyful and secure in our lives and in a challenging world. None of our “silver bullets” or “golden hammers” can replace what we have lost.

But there is one thing that would dramatically change the world we live in and help return us to our rootedness in Christ: Bring back the table! If we were to make the table the most sacred object of furniture in every home, in every church, in every community, our faith would quickly regain its power, and our world

would quickly become a better place. The table is the place where identity is born—the place where the story of our lives is retold, re-minded, and relived.

Humans are wired for story. We become our stories. When we go in search of our identity, we don't look for values or principles or worldviews; we look for fireworks in the sky, synapses that cause our cells to fire together and wire together. Story and image are the protons and neutrons swirling in the cells of our self-concept. At the subcellular level, we don't crave a tablet full of values and principles and props; at the core of who we are, we crave a *narraphor* (a story made with metaphors that help us understand the world, ourselves, and God better).

Given that our culture's primal, primary language of identity is narraphor, our families and churches ought to be flourishing! But something is missing from our lives—something that nourishes us with the narraphors that build our identity and stabilize our relationships. We know that families are defined by the stories they generate, by the stories they remember together over and over. Christian families are defined by the Story of

Jesus and God's relationship to humanity throughout history. And this story of our identity as a Christian people is relayed through the narraphors we tell ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren around the table generation after generation. Narraphors are the lingua franca of the Christian faith. They are our "table talk." But modern Christianity has become more "modern" than Christian, having sold out to a fast-paced, word-based, verse-backed, principles-driven template for truth, a handy little tablet of rules and regulations.

The thing is, truth is not a template. Truth is a person. And our relationship with Jesus—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—happens when narraphors are passed around the table.

Stories build our identity as a person and as a people. In twenty-first-century lingo, they are the food—our "hardware," if you will. And the server, the platform, is the table.

The story of Christianity didn't take shape behind pulpits or on altars or in books. No, the story of Christianity takes shape around tables, as people face

one another as equals, telling stories, sharing memories, enjoying food with one another.

THE FOODIE BIBLE

Someone once challenged me: “I bet I can tell you the whole Old Testament and New Testament in six sentences—three for each.”

“You’re on!” I said.

He started with the Old Testament: “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat!”

My friend went on. “Now here’s the New Testament in three sentences: ‘I love you! I forgive you! Let’s eat!’”

Jean Leclerc offers the best definition of the gospel you’ll ever hear: “Jesus ate good food with bad people.” This was so accurate a description of Jesus that someone in his day composed a satirical jingle about him that went viral: He was “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). Jesus’ dining experiences became a lifestyle around which he formed a school of disciples, such that John’s account

of the Cana wedding suggests that the wine didn't run out until Jesus and the disciples arrived.

As much as Jesus loved food, people always came first. Sometimes he got so preoccupied with people that he forgot to eat (Mark 3:20, 31; John 4:31). But the point remains the same. Jesus was killed because of his table talk and his table manners—the stories he told and the people he ate with.¹ Jesus and table so went together that the Pharisees used a table to try to trap him (Luke 14:1-24). Food is a reference point for Jesus even when he is not eating (see, for example, John 4:32). It was the table that shaped early Christian worship—the Last Supper and the post-Resurrection meals Jesus shared with his disciples. The infant Jesus is laid in a manger, from which the animals were fed; there is a table at the stable. At the very beginning of his post-Resurrection ministry, Jesus suddenly appears in front of his disciples and asks, “Got anything to eat?” (John 21:5).

Food is the building block of our Christian faith. We are part of a gourmet gospel that defines itself in terms of food and table. Yet we find ourselves at a juncture in history where we have lost the table and reduced our

“food” to non-foods. Instead of setting another plate at the table and passing the food, we pass another program or pass another resolution or pass another law.

The Pharisees lived by laws, rules, and exclusions. Jesus showed us how to live by love, grace, and inclusion. At the table we don't just feed people; we build relationships—stories and memories. We associate people with the stories we hear of them and the memories we have of them, especially sensory memories: the sounds, tastes, smells, textures, and pictures of them. These are the stuff of metaphors and narraphors.

When I want to tell my kids about the grandfather they never met but am at a loss for words, I get out some graham crackers, serve them some cheesecake, and tell them about the cherry cheesecake their Grandpa Sweet made from graham cracker crust, Philadelphia cream cheese, and Del Monte canned cherries. In so doing, I am enculturating them into the Sweet family; I am connecting the dots between their stories, his, and mine.

If we really want to learn someone's story, sitting down at the table and breaking bread together is the best way to start. First dates almost always involve a

meal. As many business deals are sealed over dessert as over desktops. As we sit and eat together, we don't just pass food around; fellow diners pass bits of themselves back and forth as well, exchanging tales as well as condiments. I like any vegetable stir-fried. I like my chicken deep-fried. I like my table story-fied.

At the table, where food and stories are passed from one person to another and one generation to another, is where each of us learns who we are, where we come from, what we can be, to whom we belong, and to what we are called. When I spread apple butter on a biscuit, I am back at my Gramma's table, eating her daily baked biscuits with Granddad's apple butter, straight from his copper apple-butter kettle. Some of my most cherished possessions and among the most beautiful items in my home, my mother's Bibles were bound to become battered and dog-eared, their covers blotched with coffee stains and their pages crumpled from teardrops, with all sorts of things falling from their pages. When I read from one of them, I am not necessarily reading the way she read, but because of what that book and its history represents, I am reading

the Story with her voice, and with the same thrill and exhilaration as she had when she read it.

The best in film criticism sends you excitedly back to the films. The best in biblical criticism should send you excitedly back to the Bible, not to start another critique but to reenter the story on a wider and deeper level of comprehension.

THE “FAMILY” TABLE

An untabled faith is an unstable faith. A neglect of the table in our churches is echoed in our families and our communities. In his book *Cooked* Michael Pollan shows that meals eaten out are almost always less healthy than foods cooked in; homemade foods generally have lower fat, salt, and caloric content.² And yet we are eating out more and more, eating in less and less. We eat one in every five meals in our car. One in four of us eat at least one fast-food meal every single day. US households spend roughly the same amount per week on fast food as on groceries.³ Sixty years ago, the average dinnertime was ninety minutes; today it is less than twelve minutes.⁴ And that’s when

we do eat dinner together, which is less and less frequently. The majority of US families report eating a single meal together less than five days a week. And even then our “dinners together” are mostly in front of the TV.

No wonder the average parent spends only 38.5 minutes per week in meaningful conversation with their children.⁵ We are losing the table.

This was brought home recently to the Sweet family when one of my kids invited a friend (let’s call him “Horace”) to spend some days with us over the summer. After the friend left, I commented that Horace seemed somewhat uneasy during his stay in our home. “Was anything wrong?” I asked.

“He did feel a little uncomfortable,” my daughter Soren offered.

“Was it something we did?” I asked.

“Sort of,” Soren answered. “He said that he has never eaten with his family at a table, and so he wasn’t sure how to act or what to do.”

A Christian teenager, attending a Christian college, had never eaten a home-cooked meal at a family table.

The media can be both a thermometer registering and a thermostat regulating the temperament of our culture. And much of our culture today reveals fragmented families with busy, out-of-the-box lives that don't conform to what is now considered "traditional" mealtimes. Yet while shows like *Modern Family* portray families that never eat together at the table, an increasing number of shows, such as *Duck Dynasty* and *Blue Bloods*, prominently feature family dinners, including prayers over meals and story sharing. It seems there is a craving for more intimacy in our lives and relationships. And if we can't get it in our homes, we'll at least watch it on TV.

Our culture is hungry for table time. And in this respect, popular culture is right in step with findings in socio-science that advocate for table gatherings. In fact, when sociologist Cody C. Delistraty culled the most recent scientific literature for *Atlantic Monthly*, he discovered proof that the loss of the table has had "quantifiable negative effects both physically and psychologically" on our families and our kids.⁶ Here's what he found:

- The #1 factor for parents raising kids who are drug-free, healthy, intelligent, kind human beings? “Frequent family dinners.”⁷
- The #1 shaper of vocabulary in younger children, even more than any other family event, including play? “Frequent family dinners.”⁸
- The #1 predictor of future academic success for elementary-age children? “Frequent family dinners.”
- One of the best safeguards against childhood obesity? “Eating meals together.”⁹
- The best prescription to prevent eating disorders among adolescent girls? “Frequent family dinners” that exude a “positive atmosphere.”¹⁰
- The variable most associated with lower incidence of depressive and suicidal thoughts among eleven- to eighteen-year-olds? “Frequent family dinners.”¹¹

If you want kids with “fewer emotional and behavioral problems, greater emotional well-being, more trusting and helpful behaviors towards others and higher life satisfaction,” then you need “more frequent family

dinners.”¹² In short, better to eat toast and jam together than ham tetrazzini alone. Better to eat simply together than eat haute cuisine alone.¹³ In the memories we make and recall, in the stories we tell and retell, in the family recipes we eat and repeat, there are things we learn at the family table we don’t learn anywhere else. There is a reason Jesus made eating a sacrament.

But what does it mean to set a “family table”? Jesus defined family differently than the way we’ve viewed it or the way his contemporaries understood it. Jesus must have scandalized more than Nazareth by not being married. As a Jewish man, and especially a rabbi, you had a duty to God, to your ancestors, and to your family to marry and reproduce. Later rabbis put it bluntly: “Seven things are condemned in heaven, and the first of these is a man without a woman.” Far from being a nuclear family advocate, Jesus turned away from his extended biological family, retained his singleness, and claimed instead a discipleship family that included all kinds of people from all walks of life.

Jesus ate all kinds of food around all kinds of tables in all kinds of places with all kinds of people. To be a

disciple of Jesus (then and now) is to love to eat, no matter what Jesus cooks and no matter where he sets the table.

Jesus redefined what it means to “be family,” just as he redefined what it means to “break bread” together at table. When Jesus fed five thousand people on a hillside, all of them became his “family” and the hillside became his “table.” When he cooked along the shore after his resurrection, Jesus’ disciples became his family, and some stones around a fire his table. Jesus ate the Passover meal in the Upper Room not with his biological family but with his new family: his male and female disciples. When Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he was really saying, “Do table in remembrance of me.” Whoever “does table” where the Jesus story is remembered is part of the Jesus family.

Eating “in” for Jesus meant more about being in relationship with God and others than inside a specified building. You can eat out and still have a family table. You can eat in and have no table at all. For some, rice and beans or a Big Mac can be a sacred feast if shared together in the spirit of Jesus. For others, the

best cooked family meal can be a burdensome offering to grumbling family members.¹⁴

Jesus' family includes marrieds, singles, widows, orphans, lepers, sinners, even animals. After all, Jesus' bassinet at birth was a food trough for beasts. If you live alone and your pets join you for food, you are sharing your table with your family. If you share a meal out with friends where stories are shared and love is honored, you have redefined family Jesus-style. Whether in church, home, or community, the table you set defines your "family" identity, as long as Jesus is present.

When Jesus reclines at the table with his disciples in the Upper Room triclinium, he warns "woe" to those who don't continue his table and those who sit at table and betray (Luke 22:21-23). A betrayal by one who breaks bread at table is far worse than any anonymous backstabber. The more intimate your relationship, the deeper the cut. The table is a place of intimacy, and those who feast at Jesus' table become family together in a new kind of relationship—one that obliterates dissension, walls, bloodlines, and divisions.

For Jesus the home is not what defines the table; the

table is what defines the home. Whether a single, working mom or an elderly man in a nursing home; whether a four-year-old child or a teenage athlete; whether a married couple or a homeless woman with her dog: We are all invited to Jesus' table and into Jesus' family.

One of our best descriptions of a "blended" family might be when university students gather. In the university of days past, in the manor building was a great hall, a multipurpose room primarily used for long dining tables and that featured pointed-arch cathedral ceilings which, like the cathedral itself, put humans in their place and scaled them appropriately to the divine. There was a time when students would sit at long tables in these halls to have their meals and to be inducted into the long-standing rituals and rhythms that make someone "an Oxford man" or "an Oxford woman." Several times a week, there were three-course evening meals that required a formal dress code of gowns and other unique garb.

The contrast between these table traditions of the past and the current collegiate "mess halls" couldn't be sharper. The modern "great rooms" found in today's

student commons are also multipurpose rooms that often feature arched ceilings, but they are architecturally designed to make humans feel larger than life. The rooms have built-in hearths around which people sit, and screens with a bar separate the “great room” from the kitchen or other all-purpose rooms of the commons. But wherever you look, there is no table in sight. And the adjoining cafeterias are chaotic rambling spaces with various drop-by stations catering to diverse ethnic and eating preferences without any common menu or common rituals of community.

And then there are online universities, where your entire learning is conducted on a tablet with no face-to-face table time at all. True online learning is peer-to-peer distributed tablet learning *and* face-to-face immersive table learning, built around a monastic model of community that eats together, worships together, prays together, sings together, lives together, and learns together.

The table is necessarily communal. And for Christians, there is a Trinitarian component to the table. Even when only two are gathered together, three

are always present. Wherever we break bread together, Jesus is always at the table. And we are to re-member him, bring him to life in every heart. Because the life of your table becomes the preeminent art of your life. You “become” a disciple to the Master Artist through your time spent together at Jesus’ table.

THE HEAD OF THE TABLE

The first word God speaks to human beings in the Bible—God’s very first commandment—is “Eat freely” (Genesis 2:16, *NASB*). The last words out of God’s mouth in the Bible—his final command? “Drink freely” (see Revelation 22:17). These bookends to the Bible are reflective of the whole of the Scriptures: Everything in between these two commands is a table, and on that table is served a life-course meal, where we feast in our hearts with thanksgiving on the very Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation: Jesus the Christ.

At the table, sitting together, facing each other, talking to each other—good food, good conversation, good laughs, good stories—we *learn* the good news of

the God who eats good food with bad people. There is nothing else like it in the world. To bring back the vigor to Christianity, to reverse the church's attrition rate, we must bring back the table. The most important thing anyone can do to strengthen our families and reproduce the faith in our kids is to bring back the table. The most important thing anyone can do to change our world for the better is to bring back the table—with Jesus seated at his rightful place.

The king of Scotland invited a local warlord to a banquet he was having at one of his castles. The king wasn't getting along with this warlord, who went by the title "Lord of the Isles," so to showcase his sovereignty, the king seated him at one of the lowly places, far from the king's table. During the meal, the king sent one of his servants to check and make sure that the Lord of the Isles knew that he was in one of the lowly places.

The Lord of the Isles said to the servant, "Go back to your king and tell him that wherever the Lord of the Isles sits, there is the head of the table!"

Wherever Jesus sits, there is the head of the table. And wherever Jesus sits, he has saved you a place.

FROM TABLET TO TABLE

*When your best friend shuts the door in your face,
Jesus pulls the chair out for you at his table.*

*When everyone else leaves the room,
Jesus saves a place for you at his table.*

*When everybody fails you,
Jesus takes you in at his table.*

*When everything in life fails you,
Jesus has reserved a special place at his table just
for you.*

*When your kids want nothing more to do with you,
Jesus wants nothing more than for you to sit down
at his table.*

*When your employer wants nothing more to do with
you,
Jesus puts you at the head of his table.*

PART I:

table
it

ONE

EVERY STORY I KNOW BEST I LEARNED FROM A FLANNELGRAPH

A Well-Storied Faith



*Wisdom . . . has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.*

PROVERBS 9:1-2

HAVE YOU EVER SAID something you wish you could take back? I've certainly written some things I wish I could take back. One of these mea culpas is a mocking of certain people I have tardily come to honor and celebrate.

In one of my early books, I wrote about how the church finds itself in a digital, electronic culture with computer-savvy kids. Yet our churches are still trying to teach the Bible through flannelgraphs, chalk talks,

and chalk artists. I made sport of those people and their ministries.

Now I am so repentant, so embarrassed I ever said such a thing. Every time I meet someone who uses flannelgraphs, I kneel down in front of them and beg, "Please forgive me. I'm so sorry for what I've done. I'm grateful to God for you."

Why the turnaround? Every story I know best I learned from a flannelgraph.

I'm a slow learner about some things, and it took me too long to realize this. For much of my life I have unknowingly suffered from a serious and stealthy illness: versitis.¹

No, not "bursitis." "Versitis."

What is "versitis," you ask? A burglar broke into a home late one night while a couple was sleeping upstairs. The woman of the house, a Christian who knew her Bible, came to the head of the stairs, saw the shadow of the burglar in the living room, and shouted out, "Acts 2:38!"

That's the verse where Peter tells the crowd, "Repent!"

Immediately the burglar fell to the floor, his hands over his head. He stayed there motionless until the police arrived and took him away.

As he got into the car, the cop said, “So it was Scripture that got you to give up?”

“What? That wasn’t Scripture. She yelled she had an axe and two .38s.”

From my childhood I have accessed the Bible through the template of books (66), chapters (1,189), and verses (31,103). The problem is that this template is alien to the material. The Bible wasn’t written numerically. The Bible was written narratively, metaphorically, in stories and poems and songs and letters and memoirs and autobiographies and dreamscapes. The original template of the Bible is not numbers; it’s *narraphors*.²

I started learning the chapter-and-verse template as early as my nursery days, through the church’s “farm system,” a training regimen made up of Sunday school pins, Upper Room certificates, “sword drills” in youth group, college “mission bingos,” N. A. Woychuk’s Bible Memory Association prizes, and Awana “jewels.” This

training regimen is systematically being dismantled, however, as more and more resources are being diverted from the farm system to preserve the bureaucracy's factory system. Hence our children's increasing biblical illiteracy, even of the alien temple, not to mention their disconnect from the ritual life of the church.

Because the farm system was still vibrant as I grew up in the church, I entered college well-versed in the Bible. At least I thought so. It wasn't until well into my ministry that I realized that, while I had memorized hundreds of Bible verses, I had never memorized a Bible story. Not one. In other words, what I had learned "by heart" was not the story, but the verses. I had "hidden . . . in my heart" (Psalm 119:11) only the parts, not the whole.

When I began itemizing what stories I knew best (Daniel in the Lions' Den, David and Goliath, Jonah and the Whale, Noah and the Flood, the Woman at the Well, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Feeding of the Five Thousand), it suddenly hit me: I had learned all these from flannelgraphs at vacation Bible school, chalk talks at Sunday school, gospel songs

at camp meetings, chalk artists at summer camps. If it had not been for the narraphorical teaching of the flannelgraph, I would have a worse case of versitis than I do.

THE GREATEST STORY NEVER TOLD

How bad is our versitis? In my public speaking, I often showcase the greatness of Jesus' communication skills by probing how he masterfully weaves a story around a metaphor, and then declaring, somewhat sarcastically, "This is *not* a Jesus method of communication: 'Here are the seven habits of highly effective discipleship.'" I can always count on a substantial number of people immediately bowing their heads, programmed by this alien template to write down the seven habits I had just said Jesus did *not* give us. Similarly, I have given entire sermons exploring a biblical story in depth, only to have someone come up to me and say, "Missed our having a text this morning." When a Jesus story only counts when it's broken down by the numbers, it is time to be averse to verse. It is versus-verses time.

You can test the severity of your own versitis by a little experiment. Can you recite from memory the most famous Bible verse, John 3:16, “the gospel in a nutshell”? I bet you can recite it perfectly. Now recite John 3:15. No? John 3:14? How about John 3:17? What story is this verse a part of? Because of our versitis, the Bible is too often stripped of story and mined for minutiae; it becomes not “the greatest story ever told” but the greatest story *never* told, or *half*-told.³

Don't feel bad. I too was once a Nicodemite. I still am in some ways.

Nicodemus—Jesus' conversation partner in the flannelgraph version of John 3:16 (encompassing John 3:1-21)—is the patron saint of all of us suffering from versitis, as well as all left-brained people. Nick-by-Nite comes to Jesus with a left-brained approach about how to enter the kingdom, and when Jesus tells him he must be born again, he responds, “How can someone be born twice?” And Jesus responds with a right-brained metaphor: “You must be born again of water and of the Spirit.” This “ruler of the Jews” interpreted Jesus literally, and mocked Jesus' metaphor:

“Must I enter my mother’s womb a second time and be born?” Nicodemus met the law, and the law lost. Nicodemus could understand truth as text, as words, as laws, as left-brain logic. But Nicodemus could not process Jesus’ right-brained imagery and poetry of being “born again.”

How many Nicodemites are there in every corner of Christianity whose versitis has caused them to be more committed to words than to the Word Made Flesh? How many have made a religion of words and lost sight of God’s Image-Made-Story?⁴ Jesus was trying to show Nicodemus how crippling versitis can be. A faith that doesn’t know what a metaphor is can’t sustain us, nor can it grasp who God is and how God relates to us. In the fourth century, for example, the Arians read the Nicene Creed literally, believing that Jesus was literally “begotten” by the Father in the same way we are “begotten” by our parents. They never did get the “begotten” metaphor. They could only think literally, and by beating down and banishing the metaphor, they knocked the stuffing out of an inspired, imaginative truth.

Meaning in life is not found from reducing things into smaller categories and making finer distinctions. Meaning in life is found in putting things together; connecting the dots; and getting the “big picture,” which can be told in narrative and metaphor.

You furnish the pictures. I'll furnish the war.

newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951)

YOUR BRAIN ON STORY

One of the most exciting conversations today is taking place at the intersection of theology and brain science; it is the most fertile and generative conversation going. We have learned more about the brain (and by extension, us) in the last twenty years than in all of previous history. For example, the human brain processes forty thoughts every second. How? Its complex circuitry of 100 billion neurons make 100 trillion connections. In other words, you can never only do one thing.⁵ Even though much of this research treats the brain as a computer, which is

vulnerable to reductionist assumptions,⁶ the thrust of the research suggests that when it comes to the human brain, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. With so many connections being made at such a rapid pace, the brain assumes a grand narrative within which everything else fits. In this way brain science and cognitive studies are telling us about the built-in human need for religion: The human brain, it appears, is hardwired for God, the Prime Mover. We were made for a relationship with our Maker.

We are also learning from cognitive science and its ancillary disciplines⁷ that words come last. Behind every word there is a backstory, which is based on a root metaphor. The right brain is primal and primary, as we prove every time we dream in wordless images and cinematic stories. To be human is to possess, and live out of, a store of stories.

Paul Ricoeur, in a series of revolutionary studies, demonstrated that *mythos* (the defining stories of a culture) and *mimésis* (the culture's underlying understanding of reality) are two features of the same process. A narrative is the extension of a metaphor;

a metaphor is an extract of narrative. The three “transcendentals of being”—beauty, truth, goodness—Ricoeur describes as “metaphorical acts”: After every disaster, the first thing survivors look for amid the rubble is not their diamonds, jewelry, or even safes. They look for their pictures, the images that tell the stories of their lives.

Narrator precedes principles, and stories and images are the crucibles of thought. Metaphors are the primary path to perceive reality, including the reality of God. To testify to truth is not to versify but to storify.

Lunch will keep us together.

Neil Sedaka

GATHERING AROUND THE STORY

The church used to have “story time,” or “testimony time.” The early Methodists called this practice a “love feast,” and it featured food and a table.

The best place to tell a story is at a table. When you tell a story, you are transferring your experiences directly to the brains of those listening; they feel what you feel, think what you think, smell what you smell. You are teleporting your story to their brain. Research on the brain activity of storytellers demonstrates that the brain patterns of their audience can start to mimic their own.⁸ Professional storytellers tell of getting an audience in a “story trance”; people so come under the spell of a story that they start breathing together, nodding their heads in unison, gasping in unison, smiling in unison, moving eyes in unison. It’s almost as if they are reenacting the story in real time. Could this be what it means to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5)? By the telling and retelling of the Jesus story, God syncs our mind with Christ.

It is important for each one of us to tell our story and hear each other’s story. Every person is a story wrapped in skin. Moreover, everyone lives multi-storied lives; as our lives intersect, so do our stories, and new stories splinter out from each encounter. As

the old country song put it, “We live in a two-story house. / She’s got her story and I’ve got mine.” But the ultimate story is the Jesus story of what God has done in the past, is doing in the present, and will do in the future. It’s that story that binds all our stories together.

What we need more than anything else is not more storybooks but more storypeople—people who together participate in the bigger story being told by Jesus. We need to tell a bigger story with our life than the story of ourselves. Our stories should point not just to ourselves but to Christ. If storytelling is brain-syncing, then telling God’s story is God-syncing. As we gather around the table, we learn to live well-storied lives, and to connect our story to God’s story.

Beyond God-syncing, as storytellers we need to engage in world-syncing. Every company that understands its audience is reorganizing itself not around the product it sells but around its *story*, its core identity in relation to its context. In a story-driven world, the one with the best story wins.

*A proposition is a picture of reality.
A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

THE WAY OF THE TABLE

When we all speak the same language, fewer words are necessary. When we don't speak the same language, more words are required. One of the reasons for the "wordiness" of the church at this point in its history is that we no longer speak the vernacular of the culture. This culture speaks the language of narraphor. Maybe it's time we learned the vernacular of the culture we're in. People are now organizing their lives by adding the best chapters they can to their life story. A sense of self is no longer about "worldviews" or "values clarification" or "leadership principles." It's all about dramatizing and monumentalizing one's life story.

The stories and images Jesus gave us, on the other hand, lift our stories into his. The narraphors of Jesus constitute a universal language with many dialects,

each one collapsing the distance between ourselves and the people who came before us, each one connecting ourselves to the people who will come after us. Jesus' narraphors are monumental in and of themselves; they point to the epic story of God and God's world; they are worth living for and dying for.

"If the world could write by itself," the Russian short-story writer Isaak Babel mused, "it would write like Tolstoy." I say, if creation could speak, it would speak like Jesus. Christians believe that creation does speak. All the earth tells its story in the Jesus story. Every stone sings out the stories of Jesus. And so do we. The stories of Jesus, as monumental as they are, are not heroic legends or tales of the heavens. They are ordinary stories of ordinary people in ordinary places doing ordinary things like fishing, tilling fields, and setting tables, but in an extraordinary way.

The ideal place to learn the Jesus stories and the Jesus soundtrack is at the table. Throughout the ages, all over the world, people gather together at a meal in order to get to know each other. If we really want to learn someone's story, sitting down at the table,

breaking bread together, is the best way to start. As we sit and eat together, we don't just pass food around; fellow diners pass bits of themselves back and forth as well, exchanging tales as well as condiments. What's the mortar to build community? The grout of grace that is ladled out at mealtime.

A creed is an ossified metaphor.

Elbert Hubbard

STARVING WITH FOOD IN SIGHT

A poor man had wanted to go on a cruise all his life. As a youth he had seen an advertisement for a luxury cruise and had dreamed ever since of spending a week on a large ocean liner, enjoying fresh sea air and relaxing in a luxurious environment. He saved money for years, carefully counting his pennies, often sacrificing personal needs so he could stretch his resources a little further.

Finally he had enough to purchase a cruise ticket. He went to a travel agent, looked over the cruise

brochures, picked out one that was especially attractive, and bought a ticket. He was hardly able to believe he was about to realize his childhood dream.

Knowing he could not afford the kind of elegant food pictured in the brochure, the man planned to bring his own provisions for the week. Accustomed to moderation after years of frugal living, and with his entire savings going to pay for the cruise ticket, the man decided to bring along a week's supply of bread and peanut butter. That was all he could afford.

The first few days of the cruise were thrilling. The man ate peanut butter sandwiches alone in his room each morning and spent the rest of his time relaxing in the sunlight and fresh air, delighted to be aboard ship.

By midweek, however, the man was beginning to notice that he was the only person on board who was not eating luxurious meals. It seemed that every time he sat on the deck or rested in the lounge or stepped outside his cabin, a porter would walk by with a huge meal for someone who had ordered room service.

By the fifth day of the cruise, the man could take it no longer. The peanut butter sandwiches seemed stale

and tasteless. He was desperately hungry, and even the fresh air and sunshine had lost their appeal. Finally, he stopped a porter and exclaimed, “Tell me how I might get one of those meals! I’m dying for some decent food, and I’ll do anything you say to earn it!”

“Why, sir, don’t you have a ticket for this cruise?” the porter asked.

“Certainly,” said the man. “But I spent everything I had for that ticket. I have nothing left with which to buy food.”

“But sir,” said the porter, “didn’t you realize? Meals are included in your passage. You may eat as much as you like!”⁹

The person in that parable is me, and you, and all those who suffer from versitis. We are sailing on the “ole ship of Zion” where the very food that can carry us beyond ourselves into genuine union and knowledge of things eternal and divine—stories, symbols, signs, sounds, images—are spread out on the banquet table 24/7, while we barely survive on a peanut butter diet of words and points. We live in poverty when we’re entitled to banquet abundance through our boarding

ticket, which reads “children of God.” The eternal feast begins not later, but here and now.

Some people, afflicted with versitis, get rattled when I suggest they read the Bible less as a document and more as a documentary, less a tablet than a table, less chopped-up verses than one story from Genesis to Revelation. They think that the way of faith is to leave childish things like flannelgraphs behind and to focus their discipleship on the principles, values, and worldviews they can mine out of every little verse. Story time, like snack time, is for kids; they need to bury their heads in the Good Book like good adult Christians. But then I remind them that God gave Ezekiel a scroll of his words and commanded him to eat it (Ezekiel 3:1). The tablet is itself a table—“as sweet as honey,” as Ezekiel put it (3:3).

Jewish children learn that the Torah is “sweeter than honey” (Psalm 119:103) on their first day of Hebrew school. In the twelfth century, Jewish children would lick Hebrew letters of the Torah written in honey (our ancestors’ equivalent to candy) upon a slab of slate to begin their study. The “sweetness” of a life of learning

was reinforced by ingesting the sweetness of God's words. Just as Petrarch routinely kissed a manuscript of Homer to show his reverence and respect, so the table is where we kiss the sweeter-than-honey stories of the Scriptures—the tablet made table.