

Heather M. Gorman
& Mark Nelson

Lunchroom Theology

Pushing Tables Together in a Fractured World



Lunchroom Theology

First published in 2024 by 100 Movements Publishing

www.100Mpublishing.com

Copyright © 2024 by Heather M. Gorman and Mark Nelson

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the authors. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

The authors have no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book and do not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024911694

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

All Scripture quotations marked VOICE are taken from The Voice™. Copyright © 2008 by Ecclesia Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-1-955142-55-7 (print)

ISBN 978-1-955142-56-4 (eBook)

Cover design and interior design by Jude May

Image © Jeremy | iStock

100 Movements Publishing

An imprint of Movement Leaders Collective

Richmond, Virginia

www.movementleaderscollective.com



Walking in Shoes Too Small

If you don't like the road you're walking, start paving another one.

DOLLY PARTON

*The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter,
even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it.*

JAMES BALDWIN

Is it possible our world is just one big high school lunchroom?

It's likely the above sentence evokes a flood of images from your teenage years—some pleasant, many not so pleasant. For some, the grainy remembrance of a horribly fluorescent-lit, tile-floored cafeteria with a water-stained ceiling conjures up vivid reflections of the “good old days.” For others, the recollection of those four arduous and painstaking years of adolescent dining will send them spiraling into multiple layers of misery. We begin this book with the assumption that most readers can identify with the reality of the high school lunchroom where every student learns how the world works in the twenty-three allotted minutes they have to secure a seat and wolf down a slice of rectangle pizza, slimy canned peaches, and a small carton of surprisingly delicious chocolate milk.

The high school lunchroom (or the “inner circle of hell” as some call it) is an integral slice of an American teenager’s life.* It’s the place where hormonally charged adolescents seek belonging and safety, where they form identity and long to be loved by someone ... anyone. Writer Anne Lamott describes it like this:

Here is the main thing I know about school lunches ... it only *looked* like a bunch of kids eating lunch. It was really about opening our insides in front of everyone It was a precursor of the showers in ... gym [class], where everyone could see your everything or your lack of everything, and smell the inside smells of your body, and the whole time you just knew you were going to catch something.¹

There are few things in life as stressful as completing the journey through the lunch line on the first day of school and emerging into the vastness of the lunchroom holding your pale pink plastic tray divided into six small segments filled with culinary abominations while quickly scanning the room to survey the social landscape. *Where will I sit? Is there space for me at that table? Which table will be the safest? Is it worth the risk to approach that side of the cafeteria? If I choose poorly, will I be sentenced to remain at that table till I graduate? Why is everyone staring at me?*

Everyone knows that in the lunchroom, it’s *all about the table*. Those aforementioned desires for belonging, identity, and safety, as well as your place in the social hierarchy, are quickly defined by your lunchroom table.

* Two important notes about the lunchroom metaphor for non-US readers: 1) In some ways, the levels and causes of polarization (“divided tables”) vary from country to country. We acknowledge this, but as lifelong residents of the US, our perspective on these divisions is shaped by our national context, where they are currently particularly acute. However, we believe this metaphor applies in so many places beyond the US and trust that you—our insightful readers—can apply the metaphor in your own context. 2) We apologize if our examples of lunchroom staples (Lunchables, etc.) don’t always translate in different cultures. We especially lament that many lunchrooms outside the US do not get to enjoy the delicacy of tater tots, which may be one of the few positive things to come out of a US lunchroom.

All students, teachers, and, yes, even the janitors (especially the janitors) know that the ecosystem of lunchroom tables can be complicated.

In the 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, social outcast Janis unfolds a detailed drawing of her school's lunchroom as she describes this ecosystem to the new girl, Cady:

Now where you sit in the cafeteria is crucial because you've got everyone there. You've got your freshmen, ROTC Guys, preps, JV jocks, Asian nerds, cool Asians, varsity jocks, unfriendly Black hotties, girls who eat their feelings, girls who don't eat anything, desperate wannabes, burn-outs, sexually active band geeks, the greatest people you will ever meet, *and* the worst: beware of The Plastics.²

Add to the list as you will—soccer boys, thespians, partiers, hippies, anime lovers, artsy people, nice and nerdy seniors, the lax bros, the popular sophomores, and the *almost* popular juniors. The list can be endless.

Nearly every American teen movie has illustrated how the world works in a high school lunchroom—from *Grease* to *Superbad* to *Can't Buy Me Love*. And, according to the 2006 cinematic classic *High School Musical*, there's one cardinal rule: "Don't mess with the flow." Apparently, staying cool in the lunchroom hierarchy means sticking to the status quo—the balance of the lunchroom universe should *never* be tampered with.³

At a *much* deeper sociological level, psychologist and educator Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, categorizes the ecosystem of a lunchroom as "the search for personal identity that intensifies in adolescence." She believes it involves "several dimensions of a teenager's life: vocational plans, religious beliefs, values and preferences, political affiliations and beliefs, gender roles, and ethnic identities."⁴

Unfortunately, as ridiculous as it might sound, we believe the lunchroom closely resembles the world into which every one of us graduates. The most frightening part is that the divisions we endure in high school will likely be the least severe and least damaging we'll experience in our lives. Those petri dishes of angst-filled, status-seeking, afraid-of-their-own-shadow teenagers

sorting through relationships and social dynamics are just a foretaste of what is to come. In the real world, our divisions may be less hormonally fueled and seemingly more “sophisticated,” but they are still there—and the hurt and separation run deep.

So, then, in response to our original question, we propose the answer is yes. Yes, our world really is just one gigantic high school lunchroom, segregated by its self-sustaining hierarchy and adolescent loathing of “the other.” In the coming pages, we’ll unpack why we believe this to be the case and why we think society is full of adults searching for most of the same things they’ve been longing for since they first washed down a grilled cheese with a swig of Capri Sun on their way to freshmen algebra. And the results are the same, just adult-sized—we find ourselves as a culture sitting around a multitude of different tables, each with people who often only care about *their* table and who would do anything to keep the status quo, to keep their influence, status, and power, even at the cost of hurting others. And yes, as we hope you would agree, this way of living in the world is freakishly broken.

And no, it is *not* the way of Jesus.

A Better Way to Live in the Lunchroom

We believe the way of Jesus entails resisting a world where we remain separate at each of our own tables, divided according to skin color, political beliefs, theological stances, denominational alignment, geography, or whatever other categories might exist—and there are *so* many categories. We are convinced that Jesus’ vision for the lunchroom is utterly incompatible with the way we have defaulted to sorting each other in our world. And so, alternatively, and perhaps subversively, we believe the way of Jesus, and thus also the way of Jesus’ followers, is one where we push all the tables together and where we are each commissioned to invite everyone, including every “other,” to that table—even those we would have never considered sitting with in high school (perhaps especially them!).

We do need to clarify one thing before we go any further: The premise of this book is that our *world* is a giant high school lunchroom. The *church* is *not* the lunchroom. The church does not own or control the lunchroom.

The church has a presence in the lunchroom; it is impacted by the culture and dynamics and “rules” of the lunchroom; it has some of its own rules and bullies and cool kids and gatekeepers; it has different tables in different corners of the lunchroom. But the lunchroom is much, much bigger than the church.

And yet, as the church, pushing tables together needs to start with us in an effort to manifest and embody the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21: “Father, may they all be one as You are in Me and I am in You; may they be in Us, for by this unity the world will believe that You sent Me” (VOICE). If Jesus meant what he said in John 17, then there is urgent and consequential work to do with extremely high stakes. Unless, of course, we enjoy being stuck in an infinite loop of adolescent thinking and behavior.

There is a better way for us to live in this lunchroom if we’re willing to push tables together. We believe this is what Jesus had in mind when he embodied a different kind of lunchroom theology—a theology that welcomed all to the table, insisted that every person had inherent value, and subverted the established social hierarchies of his day. This is what the New Testament writers incessantly called for as well. In passages like Galatians 3:28—“There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”—Paul is admonishing the church to call the entire lunchroom culture of the day into question. He is insisting that if this Jesus is indeed risen from the dead, then the entire lunchroom needs to be reorganized. And in this new reality brought about by the work of Jesus, every person in every category is of equal value. Everybody.

Throughout this book, we want to invite you into the lunchroom theology of Jesus and of those first followers living in the wake of his resurrection, in the hope that we might all begin to form a better lunchroom theology of our own. But before you read any further, we want to address a few important questions.

Should You Keep Reading?

Like most authors, we’ve spent a lot of time thinking about who we’re writing to. You have our word that we’ve done our due diligence in attempting to understand the multiplicity of angles our readers may be coming from.

To be as transparent as possible, we want you to know that we are writing to

... those of you who feel that over the last decade or two, because of rising hate and vitriol, your table has gotten significantly smaller, bringing with it an overwhelming sense of hopelessness or grief.

... those of you who sometimes feel you have no home—no table at which to sit. None of the labels that so many insist on applying (evangelical, progressive, conservative, liberal, fundamentalist) really fit.

... those of you who find yourself on *both* sides of the aisle, while those most influential in the lunchroom ecosystem try to force everyone to choose a side and settle at their clearly labeled table.

... those of you who have a suffocating weight on your chest as you realize that the hatred and discord run deeper than you initially thought.

... those of you who prefer to choose your faith community based on a biblical Christology and missiology as opposed to an “ology” or belief system based upon anything else.

... those of you who want to continue to learn, grow, discuss, and resist the temptation of settling into the camp of “I know all there is to know.”

... those of you who are seeking to pursue the radical ways of Jesus in community, in hopes of one day, once again, eating Thanksgiving dinner with your family without teetering oh so close to fisticuffs.

... those of you who want to sit around one table, a table with Jesus at the center, and who want to change the conversation.

... those of you who long to play your part in the restoration of all things instead of feeling paralyzed by the grief, sadness, and fear of the current lunchroom, which resembles so little of Jesus.

If you see yourself in any of “those,” we’d love for you to keep reading.

May We Disturb Your Peace?

If you decide to keep reading, please understand we’re inviting you to live in some tension—not tension with one another (there’s plenty of that already), but the tension that naturally arises when we’re no longer willing

to tolerate the current state of the lunchroom. Author and activist James Baldwin describes how a writer brings out this tension. He says, “A writer is, by definition, a disturber of the peace.”⁵ Disturbing one another’s peace is refusing to allow the status quo to remain. In that sense, we hope to “disturb your peace,” to disrupt whatever might need to be disrupted, to expose our current lunchroom as the antithesis to Jesus’ vision for the lunchroom.

In all of this, we don’t expect that you’ll agree with everything in this book. We expect that you may have issues with some of what we write. But we also hope that in the midst of that tension and disagreement, you might have the courage to consider a different way that works to heal the brokenness and dysfunction of the current lunchroom. We’re not seeking uniformity in ideas and beliefs, but we are asking you to come together to pursue unity, the kind of unity for which Jesus prayed. As author and missiologist Ed Stetzer writes,

Unity doesn’t require uniformity. We can be tightly bonded together in love and still retain our distinctions. In a world which is becoming increasingly polarized over ideological issues, the Church’s ability to hold deeply held differences together with unity is a witness of the power of the gospel. It is also a model for the world to follow.⁶

Entering into that tension doesn’t require us to suspend our deeply held convictions, nor discard our doctrinal differences in the pursuit of identical beliefs. “Instead,” Stetzer continues, “it means that we approach the ecumenical table looking to identify *where we can* work together rather than looking for reasons *why we can’t*.”⁷

Of course, it would be much easier to remain at each of our own tables, hoping things will just work out in the end. And we realize the work can feel too hard and uncomfortable for some, especially when it involves sitting with people we disagree with and attempting to wrestle with the sacred text of the Bible. Pastor and writer John Pavlovitz explains the risk:

Once it begins in earnest, it’s terrifying, which is why so many Christians are content never looking at the Bible too closely or challenging a

theological precept too forcefully—not because we don't feel such things are needed, but because we're afraid of the path they might lead us down. It's just easier and less taxing to take a pastor's word for it and act as though we're fine with that, operating on a sort of existential autopilot that stays safely in the superficial.⁸

Disturbing the peace means we might be uncomfortable with who else is at the table and what Scripture reveals if we start looking at it more closely. In this book, we engage *everyone* in this wrestling, and in doing so, we quote authors and teachers you may not like, inviting people from *other* tables to join our table. That's why the above paragraphs quote both Ed Stetzer *and* John Pavlovitz, two authors who land at quite different places on many important theological issues. Citation of a person's work doesn't mean endorsement of all their ideas. Rather, it's part of what it means to invite different approaches and perspectives to a discussion around one table while pursuing the way of Jesus. It's learning to live in the tension and to ask and grapple with the questions that we don't know how to face and that have kept us at separate tables for far too long.

Curating the Story

As we enter into this conversation, we think it's important to be conscious of the fact that most who decide to journey through these pages will do so with varied approaches to Scripture. This is of obvious relevance as we consider pushing our tables together. To pretend that we all view Scripture from the same perspective is a bit simplistic and naive. We all approach Scripture with different hermeneutical lenses (methods or theories of interpretation), and to deny that is, within itself, a hermeneutical lens.

So, before we go any further, let us be as clear as we possibly can about a foundational tenet in our approach to Scripture. We believe this divinely inspired text that has guided, empowered, confused, and spoken personally and intimately to so many of us functions best as a plowshare. The plowshare is the main cutting blade of a plow, which tills and cultivates the soil so that it might be ready to produce an abundance of whatever seed is planted

and which cuts through both the soft and ready-to-be-planted soil as well as the hard and fallow ground that might take a bit more effort to prepare for growth. We believe that process describes well what the Holy Scriptures do for us. They cultivate in us a place where the truth that is revealed can be planted in us, the soil, allowing for new life to come forth. A good lunchroom theology approaches the Word of God not with the intent to cut down and destroy life but to reveal, plant, and grow us as God's beloved creation.

Scripture is inviting us into a story—a narrative that, from beginning to end, is one of God putting his family back together. As the late author and theologian Frederick Buechner writes,

For all its vast diversity and unevenness, it is a book with a plot and a plot that can be readily stated. God makes the world in love. For one reason or another the world chooses to reject God. God will not reject the world but continues his mysterious and relentless pursuit of it to the end of time.⁹

God calls us to understand our individual stories in light of his larger story, and he calls us to participate in his mission of reconciliation and restoration.

We want to acknowledge that we all bring baggage into our discussions of Scripture. At one time or another, we all have fallen into the tendency of managing and controlling, dividing up and handing out, of curating Scripture to only support an already established belief or doctrine. But such tendencies unfortunately increase our fractures rather than heal them. The sad reality is that all of us—whether as individuals, churches, organizations, or denominations—are guilty of curating the text with only *our* table in mind. The response, of course, shouldn't be to abandon Scripture but rather to curate it *well*. We believe that when we do curate it well (and we know none of us will ever do this perfectly), the story can change us and the lunchroom.

Because we believe the lunchroom in Jesus' time was not unlike today's, we will lean heavily on the narratives of both Jesus and his early followers as they attempted to embody and incarnate these ways of Jesus in the earliest expressions of the church. We believe that if we enter these stories as our own, rather than as relics of the past, they can profoundly change us. This

transformation can empower us, as Jesus followers, to rethink how we might begin to push the tables together in our fractured world.

Who Are We to Guide This Conversation?

Besides the fact that we each possess our own lunchroom scars, both from our actual high school days and from living in these extraordinarily divided times, our approach to this topic comes with years of experience and even more so from an insatiable desire to learn a new way to be the church in this fractured world. So, before we go any further, we want to give you a little background on who we are and why we're writing this book together.

Growing up in the church has given me (Mark) quite a few different perspectives on the tables of which we speak. When I say “growing up in the church,” this includes playing the infant Jesus at our small-town church's Christmas pageant as my mom and dad wore the appropriate dramatic bathrobes to play Mary and Joseph. When you think about it, the Savior of the world is quite a heavy role to lay on a three-month-old.

Over the last six decades, I have inherited a faith in a God who loves me unconditionally from a family who loves me deeply. The foundational narrative I received growing up in faith and the church is a gift that I am forever grateful for. However, I have also found myself intertwined in more than a few false narratives along the way. The ecclesial narrative I was immersed in included a baseline understanding that we were the *only* ones that had it right; we were *the* church to provide all the right answers to all of life's questions; there were those who were in and those who were out. This narrative bred a belief that, even if there were multiple tables in the lunchroom, we were obviously at the right one, and those other tables should be avoided and feared. As a result, I excelled at excluding others based upon spoken and unspoken qualifiers.

In something that was more caught than taught, I had settled into a belief in God that was strictly limited to my own understanding and experiences. This kind of small-minded approach to the divine formed in me a narrow, fear-driven, reductionist faith. It was the kind of theology that all but eliminated the possibility of pushing the tables together in the way

of Jesus. My story for so many years was therefore a story of very small exclusionary tables because, quite honestly, my God was way too small and exclusionary.

Let me be clear: I do not place the blame for this understanding of God anywhere except upon myself. I have to take responsibility, regardless of outside experiences and influences, and own that this tiny lunchroom table at which I have sat for much of my life was, in so many ways, of my own making. I do not believe this small-minded table was predicated on hate or a sense of self-superiority but simply the natural result of a life lived primarily among people who talked, thought, believed, and acted exactly as I did. It meant my lunchroom table was small and set off in some faraway corner of the lunchroom, and I had little, if any, understanding of those sitting elsewhere.

Working in multiple expressions of vocational ministry (youth, university, and local church ministries) over the last three decades has enabled me to see, appreciate, and understand a variety of perspectives. As a result, I have attempted to practice a deeper and more expansive lunchroom theology. This has been expressed in two key spheres.

First, in 2007, I led the planting of a church in the city center of Knoxville, Tennessee.¹⁰ Since then, our faith community has sought to follow in the radical ways of Jesus by crafting an expression of church that provides a space for any and every person from any and every corner in the lunchroom to scoot themselves up to the table. Though far from perfect, together we've wrestled with questions of faith and life while partaking in the liberation and restoration that we believe Jesus offers.

Second, I lead a collaboration throughout our city that fosters learning communities among churches of all shapes, colors, and sizes. We attempt to set aside all our lunchroom tendencies and instead pursue kingdom-of-God things together in our area.¹¹ This current calling is propelled by a passion for us to be one in the way Jesus desires for his church.

I (Heather) will never forget the time my husband and I met the realtor who sold us our first house. We were driving around Waco, Texas, looking for a house we could afford on two graduate student stipends. When our realtor's husband, who joined us that day, found out we were both doing

PhDs in religion, he asked what denomination we were a part of. In other words, which church table did we sit at, and did we play nice with those at his church table?

I hate that question about denominations. Not because it's a bad question but because I come from a religious tradition that makes answering that question tricky. My tradition was birthed in response to denominational divisions, and our founders tried to start a movement that would bring unity to this division. They didn't want people to have to sign off on a creed to be a part of their church. "No creed but Christ," they said. "No book but the Bible." And so they rejected denominational hierarchies that tried to ensure uniformity. They refused denominational labels and instead said, "We're Christians only (though not the only Christians!)." I love so much of the spirit of this movement, but it made answering the question "What denomination are you from?" really hard. I wasn't Baptist or Lutheran or Methodist or Episcopalian. Our churches, for the most part, rejected the labels. Christ was, at least in theory, our uniter.

But answering "Christian" didn't help my realtor's husband know which lunch table I sat at. I went with our group's more common title in the south—hoping we'd get back to mortgage rates and renovation potential. My plan failed.

His response: "Oh, the churches who think they're the only ones who are saved."

Awkward silence.

He wasn't totally wrong. There are many from my tradition who have made such exclusive thinking a key part of their identity.¹² The irony that a movement founded on unity became so known for its divisiveness is not lost on me. And this is probably where I should confess that I participated in that divisiveness. I remember spending hours on the phone when I was a teenager, trying to convince my friends from the "denominations" to be baptized in the same way I was because I was certain their baptism—done in a different way or for a different reason—was invalid, and thus they were going to hell. I was terrified for them. And although I believe my motives were good, those motives were entangled with a prideful belief that I was

the captain of God's lunch table. And as the self-appointed captain of the table, my job was to recruit people to my table, screen who was allowed to sit there, and then make sure that everyone at my table knew how wrong the other tables were.

Not all folks in my tradition believe what my realtor's husband or my fourteen-year-old self did, but, as is true for all of us, my background shaped me both positively and negatively. Although there are parts of my heritage that aren't perfect, its commitment to Scripture, the church, and gathering around the table are all values I bring to this book. My hope is that my life experience, alongside my study of Scripture and church history, have given me a broader and more charitable view of the lunchroom and—perhaps most importantly—the humility to know the lunchroom is Jesus', not mine.

Throughout my life, both in the church and in my vocation as a professor of the New Testament, I have remained committed to this tradition, at least in part because I think our founders were attempting to address the lunchroom problem. They lamented the divisions they saw in the church and thought those divisions got in the way of the church achieving Jesus' vision of bringing people to him. They took seriously Jesus' words in John 17:23, where Jesus prayed that his followers would "become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." They believed that becoming one, somehow pushing together the lunch tables and learning to work together, was how the world would come to know God's love and who Jesus is. In many ways, that vision is the vision of this book.

Our experiences share some common threads: Both of us were raised in the same religious tradition and have spent our lives committed to the churches and universities of this tradition. Over the last decade, we've shared many of the same tables, both literally and metaphorically. And yet in many ways our stories are different. We are female and male, Millennial and Baby Boomer, professor and pastor, PC user and Mac enthusiast. We don't see eye to eye on every issue, and our different ministry contexts have meant that our experiences of Scripture and the lunchroom have not always been the same.

In the midst of both these similarities and differences, we share a lament for this divided and fractured world. And we also share a hope that encountering the stories of Scripture and thinking deeply about how they intersect with our own world can help us envision a better way to live in the lunchroom.

A Theology of Clicks

We realize that the perspectives and experiences that each reader carries are as varied as the number of readers. And we know that some will want to move from *Mean Girls* to the radical ways of Jesus more quickly than others. The conversation changes at a different pace for every one of us. Some are ready to dive in headlong; others are just dipping their toes in. As authors, we expect that. All we are asking for is a little forward movement.

Think of it this way: Imagine a dial that contains the letters “A” to “Z,” and imagine that each of us resides somewhere on that dial next to a specific letter and that the goal is always to be moving through the alphabet toward “Z.” Some of you enter this book around “L,” and you cannot wait to move toward “M” and further. Others come in around “C,” and the most you hope for is to get to “D” or “E” (and if things get crazy maybe all the way to “F”). This process of learning has been called a theology of “clicks.”¹³ Each time you make a move or understand a new truth, it is a “click” forward. The point is not that some are more enlightened than others and get to “Z” more quickly, but rather that throughout history, including in Scripture, we see God connecting with people where they are and moving them closer to his original intent. God meets people in their cultural moment and draws them forward with a click or two. God is the one who turns the dial. In all of it, God is inviting us *forward*. All each of us needs is a willingness to move.

Ultimately, we are writing this book because we love Jesus and we love the church (in that order). And we have great faith and hope in both. We have hope that this divisive, sectarian, everyone-sits-at-their-own-table faith is not what the future holds for those who follow Jesus. It cannot be. We were made for more than this. Our theologies, Christologies, and ecclesiologies have shrunk to the point that they have very little resemblance

to the way of living in the world that Jesus calls us to. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has said, “We all are walking in shoes too small for us.”¹⁴

We hope this book plays some role in helping us see the larger story that God has called us into and provides a vision and vocabulary for how we might bring healing to this fractured lunchroom.

Is it possible our world is just one big high school lunchroom?

In a world fraught with polarization and division—where we form separate tables based on political beliefs, skin color, economic status, theological ideas, and personal preferences—can we find a way to live differently, more aligned with the ways of Jesus?

In *Lunchroom Theology*, Heather Gorman and Mark Nelson confront our societal and theological rifts, and by weaving together scriptural and sociological insights, they expose the many ways our contemporary divisions are mirrored by the church today. Drawing extensively from the life of Jesus and the practices of his early followers, they propose a better way to live in the lunchroom. They beckon us to embody Jesus' John 17 prayer for oneness and to think faithfully and creatively about how to push tables together in our fractured world.



We live in a fractured world where too many people not only disagree with each other but actually despise each other. This book is an invitation to do something courageous—to listen, lean in, stay curious, and practice humility, especially with someone different from you.

SHANE CLAIBORNE, author; activist; founder, Red Letter Christians

Following the clear-cut example of Jesus, Gorman and Nelson provide a path to a more loving, inclusive church—one that welcomes the outsider and draws people together. Essential reading.

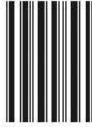
DAVE FERGUSON, author, *Hero Maker* and *B.L.E.S.S.*

By appealing to a fresh metaphor—the school lunchroom—Gorman and Nelson invite us to bold, generative thinking about the human community, providing compelling commentary on the Acts of the Apostles as the work of one table.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, Columbia Theological Seminary

We're all tired of the small story of polarization that has become too common. We need a radical shift in our imaginations. This wonderful book offers a hopeful way forward—the transformative, reconciling work of Jesus.

MANDY SMITH, pastor; author



HEATHER GORMAN (PhD, Baylor University) is professor of New Testament at Johnson University and author of *Interweaving Innocence: A Rhetorical Analysis of Luke's Passion Narrative*.

MARK NELSON is the executive director of Three Rivers Collaborative and a coauthor of *Reframation* with Alan Hirsch. Mark is the founding pastor of Crossings, a faith community in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he served for fifteen years.