This table (picture of mom and dad’s table)…this table is the place where I spent many hours of my childhood. From special meals where my mom would cover the table with the handmade tablecloth that her mother had made for her and set the table with her fine wedding china, to the late night meals of microwaved hot dogs after a day of school and work and basketball practices, to the hours my sister would spend loathing that last bite of food that my dad insisted she finish. This table. This table has new chairs around it now, but when I was growing up, the chairs were mismatched and old. We each had our own place at the table, my mom, my dad and the three of us kids. We sat in the same seat day after day, year after year, never changing it up. In fact, each of our chairs was distinctly ours – my brother and sister and I had this thing when we were young, we would fight over those little stickers that came on bananas. The first one to the bananas when my mom would get home from the grocery would get the sticker and that sticker would go on the back of our chair at the table – marking it as our own. It was the place at the table where we belonged.

Pastor Wade asked me to share with you this morning about Treefort. Treefort has been a dream of Justin’s and mine for many years and with the help of many people, we are at the brink of that dream becoming a reality. The mission of Treefort is to re-create a healthy family environment for boys whose lives are in crisis. It is our desire to invite these boys to have a seat at the table in our Treefort home – to find a place of safety and belonging that they have perhaps never known.

When my son was in first grade, I was helping out at his school one day and noticed a little boy after lunch take his half-eaten apple and stick it in his jacket pocket and then grab his partially finished bag of chips off the table and put that in his other jacket pocket. I thought that was peculiar at first, but then as I began to get to know this boy and his family situation a little better, I came to realize that this apple and these chips were possibly his dinner that night. You see, as my son tossed his leftover food without a care in the world, this 7 year old boy was thinking about his tummy that might be growling that night. When he went home from school, he never knew for sure what he would find…would there be food in the house for an after school snack, would there be anyone home to give him dinner.

It’s boys like this that Treefort is being built for. Boys like the little one that our elementary school principal found on the last day of school hiding in the computer lab…dreading summer break. Two months of no structure, no supervision, no one excited to see him every morning. It’s boys like this that Treefort is being built for. Those boys who have never had a table at which they belong.

I mentioned that the mission of Treefort is to re-create a healthy family environment for boys whose lives are in crisis. You see, if a child, almost no matter what he has been through, finds a safe place to land prior to his adolescent years, he can become a fully functioning adult who never has to spend hours with professional therapists. A safe place, a place to belong. So this is what we want to provide…a family, a table. 4 ½ years ago a home and 6 acres were donated to Treefort to help us begin. We have been planning and preparing for those 4 ½ years. Part of this preparing is remodeling the home that was donated and many people have volunteered their time to help us accomplish this huge task at a minimum cost to Treefort. As we look to having boys come live at Treefort, we will be continuing to rely on volunteers for many different things – from helping give rides to practices, to helping with work on the hobby farm that we are going to implement, to taking the boys back to school shopping or tutoring them in their schoolwork. If time is a way that you give, we will be looking for volunteers. Another way we have been preparing this 4 ½ years is by fundraising…we are a completely private organization, relying on churches and individuals to support the work of Treefort. We are so thankful for churches like this who are supporting us financially every month. Raising the money for our operating budget each year will be an ongoing task and this is another way that you can be involved in the work of Treefort. If you have the resources to give financially, once or ongoing on a monthly basis, we value the financial support. We have also spent much time creating policies and procedures that will help this first home run smoothly and we are on the brink of being ready to hire the first parents to live in this home. These parents are the critical piece to the mission. They are the ones that will do the simple, yet monumental things like tuck the boys into bed each night, greet them with a smile and a hug when they get off the bus in the afternoon, help them with homework, cook them meals each day and the list goes on and on. These are the people that will use everyday teachable moments to give these boys a foundation of faith and show them what it means to follow Jesus. These are the people that will help instill in these boys a love for learning so that the trajectory of their lives can change course as the doors of opportunity fly wide open. These are the people who will make the home a safe place and open up their table so that these boys can find the emotional healing that they need. If your heart is pounding in your chest or someone’s name is flashing through your mind right now, please talk to us after church. We are accepting applications for this position now and plan to begin the interview process for this role the second half of this month. Yes, it’s a job, but it’s more than a job, it’s a lifestyle of opening your table, of giving a place of belonging to those who have never known the safety of that.

One of the things I love about the image of opening our table to others is that I think that is a lot of what Jesus spent his days on earth doing. You see, the Jews expected Jesus to enter the scene with a bang, to make a noticeable entrance, to come vindicating them and defeating their enemies, taking over the throne, becoming their king. But instead, Jesus came to this earth eating and drinking, sharing a meal…so much so that he is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. Jesus loved to share a meal.

This table (picture of table at Levi’s house)… The story of this table is found in Luke 5. We find a man Levi had invited Jesus and a bunch of his friends for dinner. Levi was a new follower of Jesus, but not all his friends were. They were the “scum of society” of that day. Liars cheaters, thieves. People who took advantage of others and lived extravagant lives because they oppressed other people. I imagine there were addicts at the table, possibly prostitutes, maybe murderers and drug dealers. These are the people Jesus was invited to eat with that day and he did. In Jesus’ day, having dinner with someone was a sign of acceptance. Period. Today we can have dinner with someone to be polite and move on, but not in that time. Dinner was more significant, the table was a sign of mutual acceptance. And in having dinner in Levis home, Jesus accepted these people.

And then there is this table (picture of the table with Pharisees)… in Luke 7. This time though he’s sitting with the church leaders. Again, there is acceptance here of the church leader just as there was at the previous dinner with those considered the scum of the earth. Jesus broke the rules, he rose above the lines of division, he ate with those of every label – men and women, rich and poor, people of every race, the old and young, pastors and prisoners. He wasn’t meeting their needs, he wasn’t on an outreach project, he was there accepting them. Period.

Then what happens at this dinner? A prostitute shows up and begins to wash and kiss the feet of Jesus. She cried as she sat there. She begins to pour out love and acceptance toward Jesus. To the absolute shock of those who were there, He accepts her love and lets her continue to wash and touch his feet and then He has the audacity to extend forgiveness to her. Forgiveness for her promiscuity, her addiction, her defiling of her body and the bodies of others. On the one hand, the church leader had an understanding of righteousness that caused him to distance himself from the prostitute and those like her; Jesus however understands righteousness to mean moving toward her, allowing her to be at the table not as an outreach, not as a project, but as a friend. He gives her…perhaps for the first time in her life, a place to belong.

(Table of parable of Great Banquet) When Isaiah wanted to describe the coming Kingdom of God he spoke of it as “a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines” ([Isa 25:6](http://bib.ly/Isa25.6)). Jesus told a story in Luke 14 describing the Kingdom of God and again, he pictured it as a feast. There was a man who prepared a huge banquet and had the guest list made and invitations sent out. When all the preparations were done and the banquet ready, the man sent out his servants to tell the guests to come. But when they got to the guests, all of them said they couldn’t come. They had various reasons, and whether they were good excuses or not, the guy who was hosting the banquet still felt rejected. Instead of wallowing in the rejection he says to his servants, go find the people who have nothing else to do – the blind, the lame, the crippled, the poor – in those days, these people were the outcasts, not accepted as part of the regular functioning society. There were no equal opportunity laws in those days or regulations about handicap accessibility. If people were different, they were banished. But the master says, bring them to my banquet. Even with all of them, the table was not full, so the host told his servants to go out to the country lanes, behind the hedges, bring in ANYONE you can find – implying bring in the worst of the worst and they too will sit at my table. Bring them to my dinner table. Jesus wants to feast with them. We see Jesus in Scripture and we talk about it all the time – how he tells us over and over to meet the needs of the poor, the disadvantaged (whether it be widows, orphans, disabled, oppressed, abused, imprisoned…), but here we see even more. We see that Jesus is not simply calling on Christians in this life to meet the needs of these people, but to invite them to dinner – pure acceptance. To sit at the table with them.

In that day when all that is wrong is made right and all that is broken is made whole, there’s going to be one extravagant meal because when we sit at the table together, we belong to one another.

There is one more meal in scripture that I want to highlight as I wrap up. It’s a meal that occurs on the banks of the Sea of Galilee after Jesus’ resurrection and it’s recorded in [John 21](http://bib.ly/Jn21). (Table on the Beach) One night, several of the disciples of Jesus decide to go fish – that’s what they do, that’s what they know, they are fishermen. On this particular night, they work all night with no productivity at all. No fish caught…all night. They must have been tired, frustrated, ready to go home and sleep for awhile and as they headed toward shore, they look up and see someone standing there. The stranger yells out, “Have you caught anything?” “No,” they shout back. And then he says the most bizarre thing to them, “Throw your nets in on the other side of the boat,” and in their sleep deprived, frustrated state, they tried it. And what happened – they hauled in a huge load of fish. John recognizes immediately that this is Jesus and he looks at Peter and says, “It is the Lord.” As soon as Peter hears this, he jumps. Peter, known for his impulsivity is like, “Dudes, you haul the fish in, I’m going to see my Lord!” and he swims to shore. As he emerges from the sea, dripping wet, he moves toward Jesus, who has made a fire on the beach. At that moment he smells a hauntingly familiar smell. The word that John uses to describe the fire that Jesus made is a word that occurs in only one other place in Scripture—It’s the word that’s used of the fire where Peter and the others warmed themselves on the night of Jesus’s arrest and trial. The charcoal fire of [John 18:18](http://bib.ly/Jn18.18) – the place Peter was standing when he denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. That place where he stood as he heard the rooster crow and the words of Jesus echoed in his ears, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.” I can only imagine that shame that must have come over Peter as he smelled the burning charcoal, the sound of the rooster crow echoing in his ears, the words of denial burning on his lips. But the charcoal fire of [John 21](http://bib.ly/Jn21) is the place of Peter’s restoration, it’s a place where he finds belonging. The simple invitation of Jesus to his friend is, “Come and have breakfast” (21:12).  He’d been cooking up some fish and some bread to have a meal with them. After a long frustrating night, come to this table and find your rest in me. After living with shame, I am where you belong.

The table, is the place where broken people find connection and belonging. It’s the place where we sit together and have a physical reminder every day the body of Christ broken for us so that we might be made whole.

This table (Table at Treefort house)…this is where the boys who come to live at Treefort will share their meals. More than a meal though, this is the place where they will have a seat, their very own seat, a seat where they belong, where they can begin to take the broken pieces of their lives and find the wholeness that Jesus came to give us.