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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Debbie and I love to play games at home. When the boys were growing up we loved playing games as a family. Our games were always very competitive. Our games of choice were usually card games. We have always enjoyed sitting around a table for a good game of cards.

When company is at our house who also like to play games, one of our favorite card games is a form of Whist that is called Court Whist. Some of you may know the game. I suspect there are different ways of playing it, but the way we play it the game usually involves maybe sixteen or twenty people. The number of people has to be in multiples of four.

The game is played with partners, so with 16 people there would be four tables with two sets of partners at each table. The tables are distributed around the house. One is usually in the upstairs living room, one in the dining room, one in the main floor family room, and one in the basement family room. The idea is that you play three hands of whist and then total up your score. The partners who have the winning total move up a table towards the living room. The partners who have the losing total move down a table toward the basement. If you make it up to the living room and keep winning you get to stay in the living room while others arrive to try to unseat you. If you make it all the way down to the basement family room and keep losing, you remain in the basement for the evening.

The people who make it to the top table, and perhaps stay there, usually have one of two things going for them. They are often the best card players. Or, they happen to be lucky that evening to be receiving the best cards. But the way to get to the top table is to earn your spot at that table, either through skill or luck.

Today we have come to the table of the Lord. Some of the people who are coming to this table this morning are coming to participate at the table of the Lord for the very first time. We welcome you to this table and pray that you will be with us at the table of the Lord on a regular basis for the rest of your life.

As far as earthly tables go, the table of the Lord is the top table of all. It is at this table where we are privileged to eat and drink of our Lord's body and blood. It is at this table that we are privileged to receive the presence of Jesus himself anew in our lives. It is at this table that in and with the bread and the cup we are blessed to receive the forgiveness of sins and strength for daily faith and life. It is a privilege to be at this table. As far as tables on earth are concerned, it is the top table of all.

And yet, we do not come to this table because we are so good. And we do not come because we are so lucky. We do not come with any sense at all that we have earned a spot at this table because of our understanding or because of our maturity. Rather, we come to this table this morning because we have been invited to come by our Lord Jesus. And it is he who has guaranteed us a place at the table of the Lord.

This, in part, is the meaning of our second reading appointed to be read for our celebration of worship this morning from the letter to the Romans, the fourth chapter. It is the sense that we have not inherited a place at the table of the Lord through our own doing that Paul is declaring in part when he says, "If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation."

Rather, we have a place at this table because it has been promised us by Christ himself. And because our place at the table rests on Christ's promise, our place at the table is guaranteed by his suffering, death and resurrection. Again, this, in part, is the meaning when Paul goes on to declare, "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all those who live by faith."

It is an unfortunate thing that there have been those times in the history of the church when a place at the table of the Lord was reserved for only those who satisfied certain requirements. Those were considered worthy of a place at the table of the Lord who had properly prepared themselves for that place. And so it was that confession and fasting and other outward preparations were at times considered necessary to make one worthy of receiving a place at the table of the Lord. And it has been necessary to remind the church over and over again that the only thing necessary to receive a place at the table of the Lord is a humble and believing heart.

The table of the Lord is sometimes used in the Bible as a metaphor for heaven. And everything we say about a place for us at the table of the Lord on earth is true also about a place reserved for us at the table of

the Lord in heaven. Even now we are told by faith that there is a place reserved for us at the table of the Lord in heaven. That place is promised us by Christ himself. And the promise is guaranteed.

It is guaranteed because it does not depend upon us. It is not guaranteed to us because we are so good or so lucky or so mature or so intelligent. Rather, that place at the top table of all, in heaven, is guaranteed to us by Christ himself, purchased for us by his precious body and blood. It is reserved for us for all time, even into all eternity. Amen.