

Making Room
Luke 14:12-14
September 10, 2023
North Decatur Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Lewicki

Jesus said to the one who had invited him to the banquet, "When you host a meal, do not invite your friends or your siblings or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite those who don't have any money, those who live with disabilities, and those whose have lost the use of their senses. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they don't have the wealth or status to repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Today, we are introducing our theme for NDPC for the '23-24 church year. Our annual themes at NDPC serve as a kind of steady companion for our shared life together—the theme isn't in your face all of the time, but it does provide us with a shared spiritual focus. It gives us something to wonder at together. Last year's theme was "*Be*." We chose it just as we were emerging from total isolation and the pandemic, and we were yearning to *be* together and learning to not take the gift of our own being for granted.

Now that we've all learned how to be, now that we're all *experts* at being... what's next? Our theme for this year is... *Making Room*.

Making room. The act of *making additional space available when no such space appeared to exist before*.

God says to you—in so many ways—"make room in your life." If you think you've ever heard God say to you, "child, make room," turn to your neighbor and say, "neighbor, I gotta' make some room!"

Sometimes we are called to make space when there was no space before.

- You're sitting by yourself at a table at a crowded coffee shop and someone comes in and they are looking around for a seat and you have to decide... is there room at my table to share?
 - Say: *I gotta make some room.*
- Someone moves into your neighborhood—and you think: do I have room to get to know this person, this stranger, do I have room in my life for a new relationship?
 - Say: *I gotta make some room.*
- Or maybe you've brought a child into your home through birth or adoption or fostering and all kinds of things you thought were set are now in chaos. Or some of you are bringing a parent close—maybe into your home—and now there's the fullness of someone else's life in the middle of yours.
 - Say: *I gotta make some more room.*

We will all get sick, our bodies will all stop working the way we've expected them to work... and then, all of a sudden, you have to make room... for a new way of thinking about yourself. When you lose independence, you increase in dependence—you take up more room in someone else's life. How many times have you heard someone say, "I don't want to be a burden?" You are not burden, you are a beloved child of God and an honored presence in your family's life.

Making room can be about making literal space. But I hope you see already how the exterior act of making room always involves an interior shift. Something has to move inside—a shift inside the head... and maybe also inside your heart. You've got to shift around the furniture on the inside—maybe build an addition in the heart. Making room is a kind of spiritual awakening to the presence of the Other. It's letting go of your need for your world to be "just so."

Making room is a way of moving gracefully with the changes of life.

In all of our talk about making room this year, we will, of course, talk about what it means to make room for God in our lives. Sounds kind of funny: come on over God, let me make room for you, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of every living thing. We'll ask questions like "What does it mean to you that God might want to occupy some kind of space in your life?" Or flip the question around. What does it mean that God, as George Herbert said, makes room for you, bids you welcome, what does it mean that you have been invited to sit at Love's table and feast? If you have been the guest at Love's table, what kind of host are you to become for others?

As we move through the year,

- I'll talk about some of the great stories from the Bible in which the idea of Making Room gets negotiated: the Creation story—where there is clearly room for every living being, Noah and the Ark in which there is very little room, and the story of the Promised Land—which begs the question: "what could it mean that God makes room for God's people in a land that is *already occupied* by other people?" It was a hard question for Israel; it's just as hard for all of us who live in a land that was already occupied. That's September and October.
- In November we're going to do a deep dive into the spirituality of Howard Thurman, who, like few other modern theologians understood the connection between your interior spaciousness, the practice of quietness, and the quest for true social justice. In Thurman, the generosity and equanimity of the inner world shapes the way we experience and form the world around us.
- Along the way this year, we're going to have a churchwide conversation about this room itself. What kind of room do we need to make here for us and for the next generation to experience God's love? It's been 20 years since we touched anything. We'll talk about making room here... maybe getting new carpet, maybe moving a few pews.

Making room is a big idea—like I said, it's something about which all of us can wonder. How do we think about making room for new folks in our community, how do we make room to disrupt the class and racial stratifications of our social worlds? How do we make room at our table for new friends, and—if we're serious about Jesus, for our enemies? How do you make room inside your life—how can you make a sanctuary out of time—a place of stillness, self-reflection, and deeper, meaningful relationships?

It's going to be fun making room together. Before I close, I want to focus for a second on what I think is the difficulty of making room. Because if making room were easy, if it came naturally to all of us, if we did it with no problem... it would be a lousy theme. But we don't always make room—not for change, not for each other, and not for God. Why is making room hard?

You and I are always operating on suppositions about the world. It's how we roll. The world is mysterious and we want it to be less mysterious and more predictable. So we take knowledge wherever we can get it. And this knowledge becomes maps for making sense of the world.

Physics, for example—that's a good, reliable map for the world. What goes up, must come down. Rocks are hard. Donuts are delicious—that's not physics, but it's definitely true. Physics is a helpful map because some things about the world don't make plain sense. Airplanes, for some reason, stay in the air. I don't know why. But I trust physics, so we get on an airplane to see my family. Our maps often work.

We don't just have maps for the natural world. We also have maps for the social world. Maps that help us predict how human beings should interact. We call these maps laws, and moral codes, and sacred stories. These maps help us determine what we can expect from each other. Take driving, for example. Imagine driving if everyone just made it up as we went along? It would be the bumper cars at the state fair. But as it is, everyone follows the same laws (except that one guy). It's actually amazing we human beings get along as smoothly as we do, because, frankly, we are much more mysterious than even airplanes. Our maps—our laws, our moral codes, our sacred stories—the work to organize this unpredictable world into something that makes some kind of sense.

Except when it doesn't. Sometimes our maps break down. Sometimes the rules that we learned about how the world "should" work or how people "should" act don't apply. Or sometimes one map says one thing and another map tells us another. That's when life gets interesting. When the social maps we have break down—that's often when we are called to make room.

I'll give you two examples from my own life

- I was 17 years old and visiting colleges. I was a nervous, goofy kid anxiously getting ready to make a good impression for an admissions officer. And I stepped out of the car on this campus and was immediately confronted by a man who had been sitting on the sidewalk. He asked me for something—maybe money, and when I said no he was in my face speaking loudly and angrily. I stood there on the precipice of my future, he was literally in my way, all I could think of in that moment and in the days afterward were these random sayings of this guy Jesus. "If someone asks you for your coat, give them your shirt, too." There was one map that was pointing me one way and another map came up out of nowhere to point me in another direction... I went to that school because I knew, somehow, that the questions that man had asked me were the ones I needed to answer. How do you make room for the new voice, the one that says "go this way, not that way?"
- Then, of course, many of you know we experienced complications in our pregnancy with Margaret. The prospect of losing your child at 18 weeks is not in anyone's map of what becoming a father will be like. We did not lose Margaret. But we spent 11 months in the hospital at her bedside in the NICU. And then we decided we had to uproot our lives in New York to move to a godforsaken place called Georgia. The map that I had about what parenting was going to be like failed. We had to make room for something entirely different.

Our first response is almost always, "I don't have room." "I like things as they are." "I don't space to put you up." "I don't have enough time for this." "I don't have the energy to take this on."

The invitation to make room in our lives almost always comes to us as a surprise—even as a shock. We resist. We make excuses. We say there's not enough. We build fences. And we say to ourselves that person over there has no claim on me. We cling to the old map.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news of God’s Reign that Jesus comes to inaugurate always comes as a surprise—or a shock. The story of Jesus is consistently a story about making room when we thought there was no room.

There’s not enough bread here to feed all these people!
We’ve got to make more room.

That person is sick and doesn’t belong here with us.
We’ve got to make more room.

That person isn’t one of us!
We’ve got to make more room.

In Luke’s gospel, there is no place where the will of God is to be taken more seriously than the dinner table. The dinner table is where the mad scientist Jesus conducts his most outrageous experiments in creating Beloved Community. It’s almost like good news of God must be experienced at our tables if it is to be experienced at all.

At the table of Jesus, power, wealth, dignity, creativity, blessing, purpose, love—every good gift of God is shared.

Love bids us all welcome. God’s voice says: “there is always room.”