

Sermon: **PREPARING A PLACE**

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Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Abba's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

"You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to Abba God except through me. If you know me, you will know Abba God also. From now on you do know God and have seen God."

Philip said to him, "Rabbi, show us God, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen God. How can you say, 'Show us God? Do you not believe that I am in God and God is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but God who dwells in me works through me. Believe me that I am in God and God is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves."

—John 14.1-11

Jesus says, "I've gone to prepare a place for you." One unfortunate thing about this passage is that we use it all the time at funerals, which is not a bad thing, but it gets us thinking that what Jesus was talking about is the afterlife. Now, it's true that when you die then you will be with God— but what's not true is that God's house, the place where God lives, is somewhere else and you have to die to get there. The house that God lives in is the present moment. It's right here, right now.

We're not very good at being present in the present moment the way Jesus is. You know how you're talking with somebody and they're busy on their smartphone and you feel like they're not really there? Well, most of the time we're not really there for God. But Jesus is. Jesus comes to us in our distraction and takes us into his own heart so that where he is, in intimate presence with God, we can be.

Jesus knows that feels like a stretch for us. Jesus knows that every single one of us bears deep within us this wound that we've been told in so many different ways, "You don't belong. You

don't fit. You're not needed. You're not one of us. You're not right." Jesus knows we all wrestle with that. We don't feel like we're at home in this world, at home in society, at home in our own skin, and certainly not in the heart of God. We doubt that we really belong in God's heart.

So Jesus spends his ministry making a place for people, helping them to discover their belonging, extending this incredible welcome into God's heart. He's teaching in his house and they can't get in because of the crowd and they literally break a hole in the roof so that they can bring this paralytic in. Jesus makes a place in his house, *his house* for this man's healing.

When Jesus says, "In God's house there are many rooms," he's not imagining God living in this big huge mansion and you can kind of pick a room. The people in Jesus' time lived in very small little huts, little two or three room houses with a kitchen and a guest room and family sleeping quarters. When the oldest son grew up and got married he didn't move away. They built a new room and they moved in there. And when the second son got married they built another room and they'd move in there. So when Jesus says there are many rooms in God's house, it's not like a hotel where you can pick your room. It's a room that's been built for you, because you belong in the family. Jesus has prepared a place with *your* name on it.

That's how he spends his ministry, making individual people welcome in his life and in the community. So there's a woman in the synagogue who's bent over and the ruler of the synagogue says, "Don't come on Sabbath to be healed, we don't have time for that," but Jesus makes a place for her and says, "Oh yeah, this is the right place for you to be healed." Bartimaeus cries out by the side of the road, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." The disciples try to shut him up but Jesus says, "No, bring him to me," and makes a place for him. Jesus is at a dinner and in the middle of the dinner this woman comes along and anoints Jesus and people criticize the woman, but Jesus makes a place for her and says, "No, what she's doing is important, I need this. Back off." Even at the last supper Jesus *knows* his disciples, he knows what they're like. He can see what's going on in Judas. He knows Judas is going to betray him. And what does he do? He literally sets a place for him at the table right next to him in the place of honor. He prepares a place for him.

He does so even on the cross, in that terror and that agony. All the people are scorning him, and even one of the thieves makes fun of him. But the other thief says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And in all of his pain Jesus reaches out to this total stranger and says, "Truly I tell you, today: you and me, together, in paradise." He makes a place for him.

How about you? How have you experienced God's crazy hospitality in which God makes a place of belonging for you in God's own heart? Little ways, big ways, we're all hungry for that and we all experience it in little bits and pieces.

About twenty years ago I was at a workshop at a Catholic retreat center. I'd get up early every morning and go pray with the sisters. And I got to know them pretty well, especially Sister Ruth, this very old, tiny, frail woman, so full of the spirit. Toward the end of the week the priest came to say Mass for all these sisters and we all gathered in this little tiny chapel. I knew that they knew that I was a Methodist and I wasn't supposed to take communion in a Catholic church, and I didn't want to create a scene so I was just going to kind of sit this one out. When it came time for communion all the sisters came up the aisle for communion. Sister Ruth was sitting right in front of me. And right as she stood up and got in the aisle she just waved me into line. She created a place for me with such authority that I had utter confidence that if I walked up there and the priest had a problem with that she'd have my back. If he'd argue about that she'd take him out. Sister Ruth, she made a place for me. I belonged.

In a church where Beth and I served once, one Sunday a young single mom came in with these two boys, maybe four, five, six years old, somewhere in there. The most rambunctious, adrenaline, bottle rocket, unmanageable boys I've ever seen in my life. They were leaping like dolphins between seats, crawling under the seats and swinging from the chandeliers. It was disturbing. But we made a place for her and her kids, and *that very day* she joined the church. Those boys were disturbing every Sunday. People got disturbed and they complained about that and Beth and I said to them, "If you're complaining, you know what the problem is? They don't have enough parents and guess whose fault that is? You need to parent them. Don't just wait for the mom to do all the work. Step up." And one by one people in that church learned to go to the back of the sanctuary and get an activity bag and say to one of those boys, "Here come sit with me." And they'd hand them crayons and give them coloring sheets and bend the pipe cleaners with them and make a place for those boys so they belonged.

People created a place for them. Over the course of years those boys learned to sit through the service by themselves. Their mother ended up being our child care provider, so she wasn't able to be in one of the worship services. But the boys would sit there without her through two services. They would read all the prayers and sing all the hymns. By the time Beth and I left that church the older one was reading scriptures and the younger one was dancing in the dance choir. I heard a few years later when the older one was in Junior High he preached his first sermon. That church *saved* those boys by creating a place for them and probably saved their mom by creating a place for her. And the interesting thing is that church had been sort of fishing around for a sense of purpose in the world, and they discovered that they were really good at welcoming young single moms with unmanageable boys. And they had a *crew* of them in there. By the time we left it was like a zoo of wild boys. And that church knew just how to take them in, sit them down and give them crayons. They were good at that. And the church discovered their mission in life. The church saved those boys, and those boys saved the church because they could both say to each other, "You are needed. There's a place for you."

What if we did that? What if that were true of Saint Matthews? What if Saint Matthews became a community whose purpose in life is to create a place of belonging for people who don't necessarily feel like they belong? There are a *lot* of people who've been made to feel like there's no room for them. What would that be like if we were that kind of church? How would you be a part of that? If you saw somebody walk in the door that you didn't recognize, would you walk up to them and introduce yourself? Maybe.

Here's a tough one—and this is not meant as a comment about anyone who happens to be there—but maybe you wouldn't sit in the back or on the aisles. When you first came to a church where did you sit? In the back, on the aisle. Maybe we would welcome them by leaving those seats open and making a place for them. Maybe it would be during coffee hour. You go up to somebody that you don't know very well and ask them about their story, get to know them. Create a place for them. Or maybe would it be that you would help Betsy Peterson, who's here today, but not in this room. She's out there fixing coffee for you folks. And you can help create a place for people. You could be on the worship team to think about our worship together or on the stewardship team to help us provide for this kind of stuff. Maybe organize an event that would help people get to know each other or maybe you'd just get to know people. Maybe the way we create that space is by sharing our own stories. Because so many people feel, "I'm not good enough to go there. There's a bunch of Christians who have their lives all together and I don't so I don't belong there." They would have to see a different kind of community wouldn't they?

One church where I served a woman who was not a part of the church came and talked to me who. She said, "I want to talk with you about your church. I think I'm going to need some people pretty soon."

I said, "Tell me."

She said, "My life is a mess and I'm going to crash. I don't need anybody to save me. I need to crash. I just need a soft place to land."

What if we were to do that? To become a church that really wanted to make a place in the heart of God for people who didn't know that they belonged, people who need a soft place to land. Could we do that?

There is one among us who's made a place for us. I bet we can learn from him.