

## “A Bigger Table”

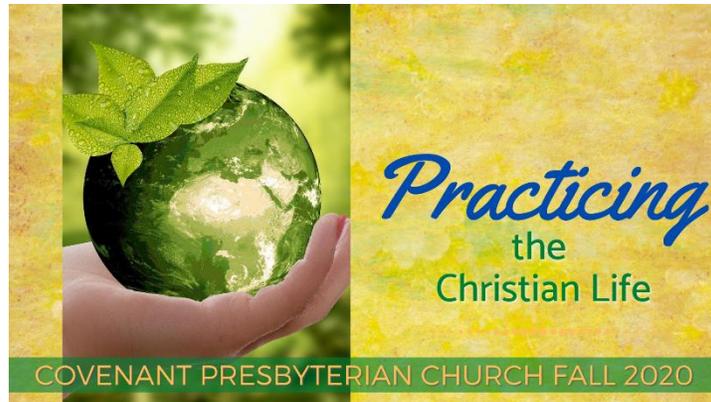
Luke 14: 7-14

Sunday, October 4, 2020

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Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, Wisconsin



If you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be and why?

This is a popular ice-breaker question, maybe you've played along.

For me, near the top of my list would be Jesus. Not just because I'm supposed to say that as a Christian or a pastor, but because of the way he shared meals with all sorts of people—rich and poor, insiders and outsiders, sick and healthy, supposedly respectable and supposedly unclean people. And his comments were sometimes disruptive or challenging, but in a spirit of love. Listen for the gospel from Luke 14.

When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Jesus wanted to make a bigger table.

Jesus wanted to make a place for everybody, especially those who were too often forgotten or ignored. He encouraged his followers to live with the same “bigger table” mindset, to live with generosity and welcome.

There's a wonderful saying: "When you have more than you need, build a bigger table, not a higher fence."

Variations on that are circulating around social media, encouraging us to think about welcome, diversity, and inclusion.

Including is our word for the day, the practice we're highlighting in our series on Christian practices.

While we may be familiar with traditional Christian practices like prayer, reading, Sabbath, and worship, our series is inviting us to think about living out Christian faith doing other less familiar practices, like advocating, healing, celebrating, mourning, and including.

Our inspiration is Pastor Kathy Escobar's book, *PRACTICING: Changing Yourself to Change the World*, which helps us see the connection between our individual lives and our impact in the world. She invites us to work on ourselves as we work on the world, to live with a sense of integrity and wholeness.

So "including" is our Christian practice for today.

In our fragmented and hurting world, we need to work on our including skills.

And remember including is more than opening the door and saying "those people could come join us."

1. Including involves a mutuality, a leveling, a give-and-take, and for some of us a humbling.
2. Including means getting outside of our own bubbles, listening, learning, and growing together.
3. Including means recognizing historical and cultural imbalances and trying to move forward together.

We're trying to do a better job including here at Covenant, as we learn together, with the hope of living more inclusively, more like Jesus.

I've been here 7.5 years and long before then, we were working on inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In 2012, our church endorsed and celebrated the ordination of the first openly gay pastor in our denomination. We continue trying to make the church more inclusive and to equip one another to be more inclusive in our daily living.

With racial issues, we have a long history of study, prayer, partnership, and action, as we try to understand complex issues and tear down barriers that divide us, in the spirit of inclusion.

In the next week, we're trying something new—a group called Racists Anonymous for people to share experiences, learn new perspectives, and grow together with the goal of becoming less racist, more inclusive like Jesus.



And politically, in the admittedly liberal community of Madison, we are trying to cultivate an inclusive environment where we're able to listen and learn from each other, and find the common good. I got a glimpse earlier this year that we're doing OK.

During our sermon series on divisive issues (abortion, guns, immigration, and such) several people shared books and articles with me, with varying perspectives. One member came into my office and shared some info which was pretty far on one end of the political spectrum.

Then this long-time member told me that they don't say much in Madison, since they feel like a minority. This person actually said that they would be considered "one of the deplorables" if their opinions were known.

Later I found myself thinking that even though this person is pretty far out on the political spectrum, they have remained at Covenant all these years, somehow feeling included, welcomed, part of the family.

As a church, we're trying to follow the example of Jesus, loving our neighbors and being open to all with inclusivity and love.

We're trying to build a bigger table.

On this World Communion Sunday, when we gather around the table, I give thanks for mission partners around the world, in the spirit of including everyone at God's table of love.

We have a longstanding partnership in **Guatemala**, supporting education, health care, and leadership development. But we're not just the givers. We are blessed by the faith and courage and prayers of our Guatemalan partners. God is at work in all of us.

We have a special connection with Monte Hebron Presbyterian Church. Pastor Flor sends her greetings and continues to pray for us.

We also are in partnership with Presbyterians in **South Sudan**, through the work of Presbyterian Mission Co-worker Leisa Wagstaff, and in **Kenya**, through the work of Intervarsity's Eric Miller. I included info about both of them in the weekly CONNECTIONS email. We also support mission work in Indonesia and Haiti.

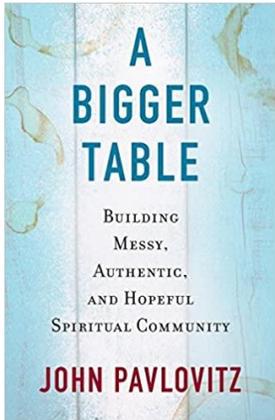
And we're in partnership with Jed and Jenny Koball, Presbyterian Mission Co-workers in **Peru**. Last year a group of 12 teens and adults was in Peru for an environmental justice mission experience. I asked Jed to share reflections from Peru.

[In the video Jed shares about the challenges of Covid-19 in Peru and thanks Covenant for supporting their ministry. Watch the video here:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1We9w\\_pnBtjVIXvevpechejZZFpP382QZ](https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1We9w_pnBtjVIXvevpechejZZFpP382QZ)]

I give thanks to God for our mission partners around the world. Together we're trying to welcome the inclusive love of God. I'm glad you got to see some of them today.

In a way, the idea of including begins with us opening our eyes to really see the people around us.



John Pavlovitz has a wonderful story about learning to see. It's in his book, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community*, the inspiration for the title of this sermon.

As a youth pastor, he planned a big event, and over 100 teens were there—for fun and games and fellowship. He was greeting people and trying to make them feel welcomed. He saw two kids standing apart, so he went over and chatted with them, trying to invite them to play games or make them smile with bad jokes, but they didn't seem to respond.

A few days later he got an email from Tracy who was one of the two teens. She shared her past difficulties, her poor choices, which led to been ostracized by other kids and even church staff. She and her brother had been forced to go to the youth event by their parents, as a form of punishment.

She was grateful that John Pavlovitz took the time to speak with her. She wrote: "I wanted to thank you. People usually don't notice me or they pretend not to see me. You made me feel *visible*." (*A Bigger Table*, p. 117)

This week I invite you to open your eyes to the people around you. Try to include them, however you can. And remember to let them include you.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus was the master includer. He invited all sorts of people to sit at the table. He came with a message of love for all. That inclusive love gives us strength to include and love others. Amen.