

## We have a Place for You at the table

by Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

In our series, we're continuing, Guided by Values and Fueled by Generosity. We started last week with our first value, and this week, we'll have our second value. The scripture verse that we chose for this value is Jesus's words found in John 14, where Jesus says, My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you?

Now, from our mission and values process, we did these surveys, and we had these summits, and through this process, we defined our values. When we took one of the surveys, there were five, four, or five kinds of value words that were voted for that were very clearly the top five. And among those five words were inclusion and welcoming. So those two things were voted in the top five.

And you voted that these things were important to you. After many conversations, we decided to combine those two into one value because they do kind of mean the same thing, and really, one extends into the other. So, the definition of welcoming, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is behaving in a polite or friendly way to a guest or new arrival.

That's what we want for Horizons. But we also voted that we want Horizons to be inclusive or including and inclusive indicates that this welcoming attitude will continue on beyond the first visit as a guest, if they choose to become part of this family, becomes an equal part of this family, and continued to be welcomed here. So here is our value.

Here is how we came up, the words that we came up with to describe this value. So would you say these words with me? We have a place for you at the table. We come from different backgrounds and varied perspectives. We've prepared a space where you are seen and heard, where you are known and belong. Everyone has a seat at God's table.

Now the Bible is this big long story about God welcoming and God, including. And if you think about it as the story goes on, God's table gets bigger and bigger throughout the story. It starts in Genesis with the first humans in the garden and then expands to God's chosen people, the Israelites. And then the table continues to expand.

Jesus models it at first for us eating with those outside of the Jewish circle. He ate with Gentile meals, He ate with sinners. Jesus talked to the woman, the Samaritan woman. The table is getting bigger. Jesus washes the feet of the one who was he knows is going to betray him at the table. He washes his feet and he serves him there at that table.

The table is getting bigger. Then Jesus dies on the cross. For you and for me, welcoming all of us to the table. Now, in the message last week, Brian talked about when Jesus said that he was going to send us a companion or a friend or of the Spirit to help us do the work that Jesus already started.

And since then, the church has continued on the work of Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit. Now, Paul is an apostle to the Gentiles, and he's part of the very first church this early church, but he is an apostle to the Gentiles, to those who are outside of the Jewish circle. He's inviting those who were once outside to now be invited and included.

Paul continued on the work of Jesus, expanding the table, and Paul said this to his in his letter to the Galatians. He said, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. So not only is everyone in who comes to the table part of the family, but we are all one.

There is no distinction between us, but there are still people outside of the church who are not welcome in both. Then in the time of the first church and even now. And they're not welcome into the church because either they've been told that they're not welcome at some churches or they don't feel like they are welcome. Now we can turn to the Book of Acts to help us learn more about the First Church and how they included others.

The Book of Acts starts out with a brief description of what happened before Jesus ascended into heaven. And then from there it's about the first church and in the eighth chapter is where we find our scripture for today. And it has three main characters. In this chapter. There is the Holy Spirit. There's fill up and there is an Ethiopian eunuch.

Now the scene is set between Gaza and Jerusalem. Now we know that right now in the area, this very area that we're talking about in Gaza, in Jerusalem, that there is war, there is a conflict that is happening right now. And so before we dig into the scripture of the story about this, this place, I'd like for us to just stop in and say a prayer together.

So would you please join me in prayer? Holy God, we can't comprehend what is happening in the world, but we pray. We pray for the people of Israel and Palestine. We pray for Jews, we pray for Christians, we pray for Muslims. We pray for the violence to cease and peace to sprout. We pray for the families of the innocent lives lost.

We pray for those who are right now in this moment, living in fear. We pray for those who are injured. We pray for those who are hungry and thirsty. We pray for those who have no home. And as we read the scriptures today about this very land, we hope that the words will set us on fire with urgency to be a part of your kingdom on earth by caring for one another, by inviting others to your table so that peace can reign throughout the world. In Jesus name, Amen.

Our scripture is across chapter eight, starting at verse 26, which says, An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip at noon. Take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert road. So he did, meanwhile, and the Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem where he had come to worship.

He was a eunuch, an official responsible for the entire Treasury of Canvas Key. And this is the title given to the Ethiopian queen. He was reading the Prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, Approach this carriage and stay with it. Now, here is the scripture that starts with pretty important. Note that the Angel and the Holy Spirit were there.

God was present in this moment, in this encounter, and I think it's amazing. The angel tells Philip to go and he does. The scripture says, So he did. That's it. He he went. He went without question. He without hesitation. He just Pat didn't pack his bags. He just went because the Spirit told him. And from Jerusalem to Gaza, it's about 60 miles.

So it's not a short distance, especially when you're on foot. Now, here's what we know about the Ethiopian Eunuch. So here's what we know, what we've already read and what we're about to read. So we know that the Ethiopian, the Ethiopian Eunuch, was a foreigner. He was a non Israelite. He would have been an African and Ethiopia in ancient times was known as the ends of the earth.

He was a member of a royal court. He was probably rich. He had a chariot. We know that he was a literate person. Many people in those days did not read, including probably most likely some of Jesus's own disciples. And he was a person of faith. He went on this long journey from the ends of the earth to Jerusalem to worship, and then he continued to read scripture on his way home from worship.

Now, show of hands. How many of you, after worship every Sunday, continue reading scripture on the way home? Anyway, he was a eunuch, so he was a castrated male. Either a deformity at birth or surgically castrated. He would have had a lack of hormones, possibly. And in Deuteronomy 23:1, it's very clear that units were not allowed in the temple.

They're not allowed to worship in the temple, continuing on in scripture, starting at verse 30, running up to the carriage. Philip heard the man reading the Prophet Isaiah. He asked, Do you really understand what you are reading? The man replied, Without someone to guide me, how could I? Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him.

This was the passage of scripture. He was reading like a sheep. He was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before. It's sheer, is silent. So he didn't open his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth? So here's this man reading this scripture out loud.

This would be Isaiah. And Philip heard him reading out loud. He probably knew that it was Isaiah. And he asked the man, Do you understand what you're reading? Which is a really good question for all of us. Like, do you understand us scripture the first time you read it? I don't. I rely heavily on mentors and commentators and notes and references and classes that I've had.

I don't understand. I don't get the cultural references sometimes because it's complicated. Scripture is complicated and life in general is complicated. And it comes in handy when you have a friend like Philip was a friend. The Eunuch comes in handy to have a friend or someone there to help you when they're when you come in this difficult situation or reading a different, difficult passage.

So, continuing on verse 34, the Eunuch asked Philip, Tell me about whom the Prophet said this. Is he talking about himself or someone else? Starting with this passage, Philip proclaims the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The Eunuch said, Look, water. What would keep me from being baptized?

He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the unit went down to the water where Philip baptized him. When they came out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The Eunuch never saw him again, but he went on his way, rejoicing. So the man, this unique Ethiopian man, asked questions about the scripture. And Philip starts with the scripture.

He starts exactly where he is. He meets him, where he is, and then he shares the good news of Jesus. Now, I wonder about the Eunuch, if he was testing Philip when he says, like what? What keeps me from

being baptized? But if we go back to what we know about this man, he would not have been allowed into the temple.

He traveled so far to go to Jerusalem to worship, but he's not allowed into the temple, and it would have been unheard of for this man to be baptized. So maybe his question to Philip was kind of a test. Like, all right, he's probably going to say, no, you can't be baptized, can't even go into the temple. That's not how Philip responds.

Jesus taught and showed that all are included to share in the Kingdom of God. But this Ethiopian man, he didn't know this yet, but Philip did. Philip just watched Jesus making the table bigger and bigger. And Philip responds to the question about the baptism again, without hesitation. He didn't care about the man's racial, sexual, national, or any other identity or background.

Philip saw a human, a child of God, and shared the good news of Jesus. He met him exactly where he was, even became his friend, even if it was just for a moment, and shared the good news. And this Ethiopian man, he heard the good news of Jesus and he started to understand salvation through Jesus understanding. Wait a minute now I am welcome at the table.

He imagined the feeling that Ethiopia had when he came out of that water. When I read the scripture passage this morning, I noticed that the scripture says that when they came out of the water and, you know, you think about a baptism like, you know, usually the pastor like dips the person in the water and then the person comes out of the water.

But in this case, it says they came out of the water like fill up and probably recognized that he needed this joy, too. And this child of God, this Ethiopian man, because Philip listened to the Holy Spirit, friended him, and shared the good news, went home rejoicing. I love that part. But it makes me wonder what our first-time guests think when they enter this church.

You know, if they're a stranger or maybe they look different or they seem different to us, do we go out of our way to take time and sit with them so that they go home rejoicing? And then what about the people who won't ever walk into the doors of a church, but we sit next to them at work or we see them in the stores?

Do we take time to sit with them? Sometimes, it's only when we sit side by side with someone we can see how God is already at work in their life. And then that opportunity allows us to share the good news of Jesus. Now, this whole process about our mission and our values, it's about who we are as followers of Jesus.

It's about who we are here at Horizons. It's about fulfilling us as followers of Christ. So, we want to be better followers of Christ. And so we have these guidelines, we have these parameters that help us. But if we stop there, then we're not doing what Jesus commanded us to do because it goes way beyond our walls.

It's about the thousands of people in our radius who don't have a church home, who don't already know the hope of Jesus, and who don't understand the importance of living in a community of love and support. So will you join in this mission? Will you pledge your time and your support? Will you pledge your money to be a part of what's going on here this season in our church life?

It's about generosity, it's about stewardship, and it's about planning for next year. We have this really big giant goal that we're trying to reach this year, and we have a budgeted amount that the steering team has approved, and we want to reach that amount to our budgeted amount in estimated giving for 2024. And that's a huge goal.

In order to hit that goal, we need new pledges, and we need increased pledges. But this is so much more than about just raising money. It's about changing lives. It's about the mission of the church and the belief in the value that God wants us to do all that we can to expand God's table so that those who don't know that they have a place at the table will not only find out that not only they do have a place at the table, but here at Horizons, we've prepared of that place for them.

So we return to this idea of welcoming and including people. And you ask yourself what? What does that look like to you? And your answer is probably going to be different than my answer and probably going to be a different answer from the person across the aisle from you. So what does it look like to be welcoming and including? Does it include and welcome kids and adults with special needs or disabilities?

Does it look like it includes welcoming people from different backgrounds, races, and genders? What about different sexual orientations or political affiliations? And we all have different answers to that. But then the most important question is, do we want to be right, or do we want the table to be bigger? And probably the even more important question is, what does God want?

I think Phillip is learning from the Eunuch in this passage just as much, if not more, than the unique is learning from Philip. Because think about it. When we encounter someone who is not like us, just like Philip did, however, that might look like what happens when we discover that that person whom we've probably already judged may be closer to God than maybe even we are, and then we have to humbly step back and think about what God would want us to do.

Now, this story about Philip and the Eunuch, often we talk about it, about sharing the good news. Yes, it's a story about sharing the good news. Absolutely. But it's also about a story about acceptance and welcoming, and inclusion is about acceptance. And that's what the Ethiopian Eunuch wanted. And it's human nature. Everyone wants to feel welcomed, included, and accepted.

And it's human nature for us to want that, to want to be accepted. But there are people in our neighborhood who don't know if they will be welcomed in the church. And I think that goes against everything Jesus taught us about expanding the table. Now, all throughout the history of the church, we've done things good things, really good things, and also some pretty terrible things.

We've done some things in the church, the church's history, to make this table smaller. We've separated blacks from whites. We've ignored all of the women in the leadership in the Bible, and we've dismissed women leaders in the church. We've given the wealthy a pew. And at a time in the church's history, we, the poor, had a small window outside of the church to peer into the church.

And we've put parameter rules around people who we deem unworthy, while at the same time, we've ignored our own sin. Jesus was about expanding the table. Horizons is about expanding and building the table. And Jesus said, My Father's house has room to spare. If that were not the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you?

I want you to take a look at this testimonial video of somebody who has found a place at this table here at Horizons. Take a look.

Kaylie Wittwer:

Hi, my name is Kaylie Wittwer. I grew up Catholic, and I'd always been around church my entire life. When I was 15, my friend invited me to a youth group at a different church, and I ended up getting very involved in that church. I ended up going to a church that was affiliated with other churches and Assemblies of God Church, and I was involved in that church for about ten years, and I went to a leadership program there. But then, in about 2020, I just kind of felt my faith begin to shift as I was a mom to a new baby, and I was pregnant again.

I really wanted to weed out what I believed and wanted to feel more secure and confident in my faith. So I just kind of started figuring out what I believed and why, and it led me to Horizons. I found Horizons completely random during a church search. I had researched some denominations and some different churches, and I was really impressed with what I saw.

I really liked that they kind of had a more traditional background with the United Methodist Church, but also they were more contemporary, which reminded me of the church that I was in for the past ten years. So it just felt like a really nice fit in between what I was used to. And so I decided to check it out.

I remember feeling very impressed, and then when I was looking for ways to get involved or ways to just make connections with people in the church, I actually found a book study that Horizons was doing with the Justice and Mercy Ministry on the book *Between the World and Me*, and I was just really surprised to even see this book being studied in a church.

I've always been passionate about justice issues, especially racial justice. And so it just felt like something that was really a good fit for me and something that I could try out. So I went to that book study and I just left feeling very impressed, very, um, just confident in my faith that these were people that I wanted to be around, that I wanted to share with.

And then I got involved with the Justice and Mercy ministry and I became a team leader in justice and action. And it just really means a lot to me to be in a church that takes justice, works seriously, gets to the root causes of problems, and actually comes alongside people with those things. And it's been a game changer in my faith.

It has helped me feel more secure, comfortable, and confident, and I am just where I need to be doing justice. Working with some amazing people here at Horizons, I decided to invite my friends Tiffany and Randi. I have been friends with them for several years, and I invited them just to talk about the book study. I would actually send them a voice message every single night after that book study.

And just really the impact of the stuff that I was learning, sending that to them. And I just wanted to share that with them. I didn't know if they would come here or not. I just kind of said, like, I am really loving this. I would love if you guys could check this out with me. They started coming to Horizons, and they've been here ever since.

And it's been so much fun to watch our families just grow together and be together again in this church and, making meaningful connections with people and serving in different areas. It's been super fun to

see that. I'm thankful that Horizon's had a place at the table for us, and I can't wait to continue to welcome others here.

Pastor Mandy:

Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all of the world until Christ comes in final victory, and we will feast at His Heavenly banquet through your Son, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit and your Holy Church. All honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.

Amen.