

## Building a Bigger Table Mark 14:1-9

*It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> by stealth and kill him; <sup>2</sup> for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.” <sup>3</sup> While he was at Bethany in the house of **Simon the leper**,<sup>[b]</sup> as he sat at the table, **κατακειμένον αὐτοῦ-recline at table** a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open (**suntribo συντρίψα- to crush, to shatter, break in pieces, bruise**) the jar and poured the ointment on his head. <sup>4</sup> But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii,<sup>[c]</sup> and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>7</sup> For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. <sup>9</sup> Truly I tell you, wherever the good news<sup>[d]</sup> is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”*

Hello People of God of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin!  
The sermon today is titled: Building a Bigger Table.

The theme, Building a Bigger Table, grows out of synod’s ongoing focus, To Do Justice and the Bible verse from Micah 6:8: What is it that the Lord requires of you? Do justice, Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

2020 has been an unusual year in which we’ve learned how to live through a pandemic, learned how to be people of faith during Covid 19, experienced a financial crisis, and protests against racial injustice. ...many learned how to work at home, homeschool children, social distance, care for elderly loved ones without being able to see them in person... layered over all of this is an aggressively divisive political climate leading up to a presidential election in November.

### **Slide: Bigger Table**

I was ordained in 1986 and my first call was to American Lutheran Church, Windom, MN. The church is located across the street from a large group home for young adults with cognitive and physical disabilities The **Home for Creative Living**. Several of the residents in this group home would come to worship on Sunday morning at ALC. Two residents were in motorized wheelchairs. They would usually sit in the back and sometimes I could hear them. They sometimes spoke out loud during worship and occasionally made other noises. Almost as soon as I started my new call, I heard complaints from church members about the residents of the group home. “They were disrupting our worship.”

The noise never bothered me, what bothered me was the group home residents never came up to the altar for Holy Communion. I asked about it and was told, it was because the residents weren’t confirmed, or they hadn’t taken the first communion classes.

It was at that moment a small lightbulb went off. This is something I can fix. Before going to seminary, I was a special education teacher. I decided to teach a special education confirmation class. The church council was wary to say the least. They were concerned about the residents disrupting worship and there were side conversations about whether the group home residents were able to comprehend enough or know enough of the faith to receive communion.

Nonetheless, I was determined, to see all God's children welcomed at the altar rail for communion.

#### **Slide: Four stairs leading to the altar rail**

I invited these young adults to a series of Saturday morning confirmation classes I designed for them. I have two favorite memories from that class.

One was the lesson on Holy Communion. The students had limited verbal skills and this is before iPads, so I created a picture board, a language board with photos of loaf of bread, wine glass, a picture of Jesus, a heart, the cross, and a photo of the student and a picture of a Bible with John 3:16 highlighted. I explained the pictures and what HOLY COMMUNION meant. Slowly with much pointing and repeating we learned that Holy Communion is how God loves us. Bread is Jesus body. Wine is Jesus blood. For God so loved the world he gave his only son. We practiced holding out our hands, we tasted the wine and bread. We repeated this lesson for several weeks.

One Saturday I noticed a member of the church council standing in the doorway watching. It was time to end the class so for his benefit, I reviewed what we had learned. I asked one of the students, Rodney, what he knew about Holy Communion. He pointed to the picture of bread and the wine. And then Rodney pointed to the picture of Jesus, the picture of the heart and then himself. Jesus loves Rodney! And then without me promoting and with some effort Rodney said his own name, he said, "Rodney" and then he pointed to the heart and then to the picture of Jesus. Rodney loves Jesus.

It is enough to know that you are loved. Rodney was a beloved child of God. The wary church council members were beloved children of God.

#### **Slide: Rodney in confirmation robe**

The second part of that story was confirmation day, it was as always, a special day. Rodney, our other friends from the group home and twenty excited 9<sup>th</sup> graders all got their white robes and red carnations. It was a big deal day especially for Rodney. We built a ramp so Rodney and his motorized wheelchair could get up to the table, to the altar for the affirmation of baptism and for first communion. Rodney was part of the procession that day, carrying the Bible with one hand and driving his wheelchair with the other, leading the class to the front of the church while we all sang, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

This is one of my favorite photos. For years, there wasn't a place at the table for Rodney or others like him. It took time and convincing of the wary that there is a place at the table for everyone born, no exceptions. Sometimes we have to do a little extra work like build a ramp, teach an extra class, convince a few judgmental people, but it is always the right thing to do. It is the just thing. There is room at God's Table for all of God's children.

Today, thirty years after my first confirmation class with the cognitively and physically disabled young adults from the Home for Creative Living in Windom, MN, it is hard for us to remember, difficult to believe there was ever a time when they were not really welcomed in churches or even invited to the communion table. While no one forbid them from coming to worship, they weren't fully welcomed to the table. More daunting than the steps up to the altar was the invisible wall that had been built by the members of the congregations that made it impossible for them to be full participants in the worship service.

Over the years since this story, our churches and our culture at large has become more welcoming and better about making a place at the table for persons with physical and cognitive disabilities. We built a ramp, we built a bigger table. The work is not done. We still need to be about Building a Bigger Table...

### **Slide: Bigger Table**

How has your congregation welcomed persons with disabilities?  
How has your church built a bigger table?

Who are the people missing from your churches today?  
Is there a place for them at the table in your congregation?  
Are there steps, obstacles, invisible walls, unwritten rules that prevent people of different **abilities**, race, sexual orientation, economic background from fully participating in your congregation?

How can you build a ramp so all are welcomed at the table?

### **Slide: Church Sign**

Are there rules that keep them away or are there invisible walls with invisible signs that say, "You can come to our church if you learn our ways, sing our songs, eat our food and become just like us. We really don't want to learn your ways, sing your songs, or eat your food. We won't change for you."

Is there an invisible sign next to your church sign that Welcome...White, middle class, middle age, straight people, just like those of us already here.

Is it just "understood" that this is a church for people with names like ours... Johnsons, Nelsons, Petersons, Olsons, and Andersons?

How can you build a ramp so all are welcomed?

### **Slide: Woman anointing Jesus' head**

In the gospel reading from Mark 14

Notice this,

1. Jesus was sitting at the table in Simon the Leper's house when the
2. A woman broke open an alabaster jar and anointed Jesus' head with costly perfume.

This is crazy! What is Jesus thinking!! This is all culturally uncool. When this story was told in the first century in ancient Palestine, the people who heard it were shocked. Jesus sitting at the same table with a man named Simon who is or was a leper and allowing an named, unrelated

woman to touch his head...violates the religious purity laws, it was all against the religious laws of the day. Good JEWS don't do that! Jesus breaks the rules, shatters the laws that separated people, men and women, clean and unclean.

**Slide: Greek Suntribo broke open, crush, shatter**

Look closely at this text. The woman broke it open, the Greek word is suntribo, which also means *to crush, to shatter, to break apart*. This is a word that connotes strength and power. Not only did she shatter the jar, she got noticed by the others in the room for her outrageous, lavish, generosity of pour expensive perfume on Jesus' head. The unnamed woman then witnessed

Jesus crushing the stereotypes, breaking down the wall between men and women, shattering the idea that there was such a thing as clean and unclean people... so that there would be a place at the table for them all.

Then just a few days later, Jesus' body was broken open for us...Jesus' blood poured out...for us. The unnamed woman was anointing Jesus for burial.

2000 years ago....Jesus BROKE IT OPEN! He continues the work today through us breaking down walls in our own hearts and teaching us how to build ramps and bigger tables....

2000 years ago Jesus broke it open, his life death and resurrection was all proclaiming a new way, the reign of God, the reign of love, without barriers or walls, love without limits, love without exception,

Galatians 3:26-28 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Make a bigger table, put in the leaves, gather up the extra chairs, find all the plates and silverware you have because all are welcomed at God's table...Jews/Greeks, Jews/Romans, Male/Female, young and old, abled/disabled, children/elders, slave/free, rich/poor, black and white and brown...did I mention male and female?

**Slide: Elizabeth Platz**

- For over 400 years of Lutheran history, women were not allowed at the table as pastors. It was only 50 years ago that the first woman was allowed to preside at communion. It was 50 years ago Nov. 20, 1970 when Elizabeth Platz was ordained in the Lutheran Church. Now there is a place at the table for women pastors. We are grateful for those who built the ramp that made it possible.
- It was 40 years ago that the first women of color, African America, Latina was ordained a Lutheran Pastor and it was 10 years ago that openly LGBTQ individuals were ordained as Lutheran pastors.

On the one hand, today we celebrate that all are welcome at the table, not exceptions and we gather to celebrate all those who have worked so hard for justice; to teach, challenge, and convince, change minds, change policy, change of hearts, build ramps so that all of God's children have a place at the table. On the other hand we acknowledge we have a long ways to go to become a fully inclusive church.

AS Lutherans we have so much to offer...we have this amazing theology of grace and forgiveness that the world is dying to hear...we have the story of Jesus...the good news about his life and death and resurrection that so many have never heard...we have hope and a faith community that means so much to us....are we willing to share it with others....?? We have the sacraments-the water of grace and the table of love that are open to all...how can your church let them know they have a place at the table?

How will we address our biases, our prejudices, our sin of racism, sexism, homophobia that intentionally or unintentional put up invisible no trespassing signs. What will WE do to accept and deal with our white privilege, fragility, superiority...how can we use it to build ramps? What will we do to take down the invisible signs on our hearts and our churches that limit our love for our neighbor?

How will **we change** so all will know that they have a place at the table?

When we gather together again in assembly, we will be challenged to acknowledge that intentionally and unintentionally there have been many who have been excluded from a place at God's Table in our churches and in our ministries. We confess the sin of the things that we've done and the things we've left UN Done.

We will recommit ourselves to the work of Justice in every congregation in our synod and in everything we do as a synod...

### **Slide: Building a ramp/Building a bigger Table**

If we really want to have an inclusive church, if we really want to be a church that loves without limits, we've got to be the one that build the ramp, and build a bigger table...

There were three steps up to the altar that kept Rodney from the table. Those who were physically able built a ramp so that we would all be on the same level.

If we really want to have an inclusive church, one that loves without limits we will be the ones taking special classes to learn about white privilege and racism...

If we want to become a racially diverse church we are the ones that will need to take the first step to build relationships, friendships with persons of races different than our own.

If we want to be a Reconciling in Christ church, we are the one who will need to take the first steps and the second steps to build friends and connections with persons of the LGBTQIA+ community.

In response to God's great love for us in Christ Jesus we live out the greatest commandment to Love God and Love our Neighbors as Ourselves. We are God's hands and God's feet when we are the ones that build the ramp and build a bigger table so all are welcome. No exceptions.

Thanks be to God, AMEN

Here are three action steps you can take to start building that ramp.

1. Robin DeAngelo, author of *White Fragility*, says that the first step is to “**Remove from your vocabulary the claims “I’m not a racist.”** I’m not sexist. I’m not prejudice. Instead of being defensive, be humble, be a learner, take a baby step, be open to learn and wonder with people you trust...How am I racist, sexist, prejudiced? This will go a long way to build the ramp over the first step?
2. **You can never understand what you need to understand about racism if you only listen to white people.**<sup>1</sup> Build relationships. Talk to people of color. Get to know someone who is LGBTQIA+. Read a book written by a person of color, listen to a podcast, watch a youtube video or movie about a person of color’s life experiences. Here are some suggestions... *Waking Up White*, *Dear Church*, *White Fragility*...*Selma*, *Just Mercy*...
3. **Take action and work for justice through your local church.** Figure out what you would have to do to remove the invisible sign that says persons of color, LGBTQIA persons, cognitively and physically challenged persons aren’t really welcome. Begin the conversation to become a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation, start a Green Team and make your congregation more environmentally aware. Join the synod’s justice team. The next meeting is October 6.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin DiAngelo