Still There Is Room
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 4, 2026 (World Communion)
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Athens

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner, he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"
(Luke 14:15–24, NRSVue)

About this time 11 years ago, a family in Sacramento, California found themselves facing the remains of a wedding that was no longer going to happen. The reception had already been paid for at the Citizen Hotel. The banquet room was reserved, the tables were waiting, and an elaborate dinner had been planned and paid for, for about 120 guests. But then, only days before the wedding, the groom called it off. There was grief enough in *that* already. But there was also a banquet, fully planned and paid for, with no one coming to eat it.

So, the bride's family made a decision. They contacted a local organization serving people experiencing homelessness and invited *them* to come instead. The first guest arrived nearly half an hour early, a woman who was living in a shelter because she could no longer afford rent. Then more came: single people, families, grandparents, children. They sat down in the hotel ballroom and ate the kind of meal they would almost certainly never have expected to eat in a lifetime – tri-tip beef, salmon, gnocchi, all the food that had been prepared for somebody else's celebration.

There is something poignant about that true story even before it becomes beautiful. A feast had been prepared. Places were waiting. The people everyone expected to see around the tables were absent. And then the room began to fill with faces *no one* had imagined there, when things were first being arranged.

Jesus once told a story like that. He was himself sitting at a dinner table when one of the other guests declared, rather piously, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" And Jesus responded by telling about someone who prepared a great dinner and invited many people. When everything was ready, the message went out: "Come, for everything is ready

now." You can almost hear the bustle in the house! Food coming from the kitchen. Lamps lit. Places prepared. The host waiting for the sound of guests at the door.

And then the *excuses* begin! One has bought a piece of land and needs to go see it. Another has purchased five yoke of oxen and wants to try them out. Another has just married and can't come. None of these people sounds particularly wicked. They have property to attend to, business to conduct, relationships that demand their time. Life is full, and the invitation arrives right in the middle of it.

But the dinner is ready *now*. *Now* … that little word is important for this story, for this kingdom of God is not merely a beautiful possibility somewhere beyond the horizon. The feast is prepared. The invitation has been given. Something is happening, *now*, that calls for a response. And these people, for *perfectly ordinary* reasons, *miss* it.

One might imagine that the greatest spiritual danger in life comes from outright hostility to God, but Jesus suggests something much quieter, more ordinary. We can become so absorbed in the life we've constructed that we fail to recognize the *urgency* of grace when it stands at the door. There can always be one more field to inspect, one more obligation to meet, one more matter demanding our attention before we give ourselves to the life that God is offering.

The host in Jesus' story is angry, but he *doesn't* cancel the dinner. The feast *will* go on. He sends his servant out into the streets and lanes of the town to bring in people who would rarely have appeared on the original guest list: the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. People accustomed to passing the houses of the wealthy from the outside suddenly find themselves summoned through the door.

And after they have come, the servant returns with a remarkable report: "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and still there is room." *Still there is room*. In those words is the very essence of the gospel! Some people know what it is to stand near a doorway and wonder whether they dare cross it. Perhaps life has taught them to expect that certain rooms are meant for other people. Perhaps *religion itself* has taught them that. But in Jesus' story the servant is still being sent out, the doors are still open, and the Host is still saying: *Bring them in*. Still there is room.

But for those of us who have never doubted that we belong, those same words of grace could carry a little disturbance, along with the promise, for *still* there *is* room – beyond the boundaries we've drawn, room for people we had *not* expected, room beyond our own careful calculations about who belongs where. This grace has a disturbing way of outrunning our careful arrangements.

And for those of us who are already fluent in the language of church, who sing the hymns and receive communion and are quite sure that we understand something about grace, Jesus raises yet another question – one that *rattles* me the longer I sit with it: *Have we actually accepted the invitation?*

Because there's a difference between *believing* in the feast and *coming hungry* to it. We can admire the generosity of God, speak eloquently about welcome, even spend our lives helping to make room for others, while still keeping some guarded distance between ourselves and the very grace we proclaim. Perhaps we are more comfortable *managing* grace than *needing* it. More comfortable thinking of ourselves as people who have something to offer than as people who must finally sit down with empty hands, like the rest, and be fed.

Maybe this is why the invitation in Jesus' story is harder than it first appears. "Come, for everything is ready." To accept that invitation means admitting that we too *are* hungry, that the life we have so carefully arranged for ourselves cannot finally satisfy. Grace asks us to become *receivers* before we become anything else—to trust that what God is offering is what we most *need*, what *alone* can heal us.

That seems to me especially worth remembering on World Communion Sunday. Around the world today, Christians are gathering at tables that look very different from this one. The bread will be different. The language will be different. The prayers and music and customs may be quite unfamiliar to us. There will be Christians at those tables whose experiences we could scarcely imagine, and others whose theological convictions might puzzle us, or even trouble us.

Yet *none* of *us* is the host. That's the humility Communion places upon us. We don't come to the table as owners deciding how widely our generosity ought to extend. We come because we *too* have been invited. We arrive with empty hands. We receive bread we did not earn and grace we did not create, alongside people we did not select for ourselves.

And perhaps that's where the deeper work of grace begins, for if my own place at the table is pure gift, then I can loosen my grip on the boundaries I've learned to defend. If I am being fed by pure unbounded love, I can stop measuring so carefully who else deserves to be fed. The table does more than welcome us; over time, it can make us into people spacious enough to welcome the company God has gathered there. And *still*, there is room!

And then, impossibly, Isaiah takes this banquet image even deeper still! Jesus' parable asked whether we will *come*, and now Isaiah lets us glimpse what the Host is preparing. "On this mountain," he says, "the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food." But the wonder lies in even more than who has found a place at the table. At *this* feast, the shroud hanging over all the nations is torn away! Death itself is swallowed up … tears are wiped from every face! The call is toward a day when all that diminishes and wounds life is gathered into the mercy of God and made whole. This great banquet becomes a picture of *all creation*, healed at last!

Now the bread and cup before us this morning are small things. A taste. A sip. Hardly enough to satisfy anyone's physical hunger. Yet Christians have gathered around these small things for centuries because they carry a promise larger than themselves. At this table, we *practice* this future God has promised. We eat as though the miracle of reconciliation is more real than all the forces that divide us. We receive from one loaf as though Christ *really has* made us one

body. We come with empty hands as though this grace really is gift. And on World Communion Sunday, we remember that this table stretches farther than our eyes can see, joining us to sisters and brothers whose names we will never know, until that greater feast is finally spread.

This little meal here doesn't pretend that Isaiah's world has fully arrived. There are still tears on our faces. Death still wounds us. The nations are still restless, and the church itself remains painfully divided. But the table has been set. The invitation has gone out. And every time bread is broken and the cup is shared, we receive a taste of this new world God has promised.

And so, come today – for still there is room.

In our life together, when we gather at this table, I often remind you that this table does not belong to me, or even to this congregation or our denomination. It belongs to *Jesus Christ*, and we are here because *he* has called us here, because grace has made room for every one of us.

There is a painted canvas hanging in my office that I found a couple of years ago at an arts and crafts market at a nearby church, and that reminds me of this every day. I brought it home because its words seem to me to shine with this open heart of Christ:

> *If you are searching, saved, black, brown, white, gay, straight, sure, unsure, older, younger, peace-filled, pain-filled, able-bodied, or differently-abled ... No matter how many moms or dads or divorces or kids or chromosomes or failures or successes or questions you have ... No matter your gender or status or where you are from, know that you are welcome here*.

I love those words because they leave nothing of our actual lives outside the door. They make room for faith *and* uncertainty, joy *and* pain, the lives we're proud to tell about, and the stories we'd rather keep hidden. And perhaps most importantly, they remind me that the welcome of the gospel begins deeper than our own generosity. Before *we* ever make room for anyone else, *Christ* has made room for *all of us*.

So come to this table today with the life you actually have. Come hungry enough to receive what you cannot provide for yourself. Take the bread and the cup as gifts, and look around at the company Christ has gathered. This is how the great feast begins: in small things we can hold in our hands, yet carrying a promise larger than anything we can yet see.

For somewhere beyond this table, beyond this sanctuary, beyond all the boundaries by which we divide the human family, Isaiah's mountain is rising. The feast of God is being prepared. The shroud is being lifted. Tears are being wiped away. Death itself is being swallowed up. And all the peoples of the earth are being gathered to the Table of God.

And still, there is room! Amen.