

## A Place for All Y'all

By Bill Lawson



I recently had a dream about a great banquet table around which people of all the different religions in the world were gathered in groups according to their various faith communities. Each congregation had brought the sacred foods of their religion to this common table. For example, the Christians brought the bread. The wine or grape juice was furnished for all by the unseen Host.

As everyone received their cup of wine or juice and started to eat, we began to realize that the sacred food each group had provided was intended by the Host to be shared with all. We had all come to the table thinking that our food was only for ourselves – only for those who shared our beliefs and practices. We discovered that each group's sacred food was part of a great shared meal, like a giant potluck dinner or maybe a wedding feast... perhaps what we might think of as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. And the Christians brought the bread.

I woke from the dream and immediately associated it with the sermon I would be preaching today. I thought of the words from Psalm 23, "Thou preparest a table before me."<sup>1</sup> I thought of the promise Jesus made in today's lectionary Gospel reading, "I go to prepare a place for you."<sup>2</sup>

As I continued to reflect on the dream between then and now, the vision only kept expanding in my mind. The ideas were fed in part by the context of the festive atmosphere at the place where we were staying, whose motto is "Love all, serve all."<sup>3</sup> Cheryl and I were surrounded by people from all over the world. One spectacular group from India was celebrating a week-long wedding party with participants wearing their traditional attire of brilliant colors and beautiful designs. Mesmerizing music of their culture filled the air. They were happy and friendly. One couple gladly shared with us a little bit about what they were doing.

My waking dream continued to unfold as I imagined the vast array of spiritual music from each of the religions gathered around the banquet table, flowing together harmoniously. I remembered personal experiences of multi-cultural worship services where the types of bread from various countries and cultures were placed together on the Communion table, then shared during the Sacrament. I thought there must be multicultural versions of the various foods that are sacred to all the other religions as well. I could almost smell the blending of aromas wafting among us.

I thought about all the various languages of the earth represented in this vision. Each brought to the table their sacred texts, with favorite passages memorized for sharing their faith. The Christians were quoting John 3:16 and 1 John 4:7-8, and others were quoting representative verses of their Scriptures. I thought about the sacred arts that have graced humanity, transcending all its spiritual communions. I remembered visits to the worship spaces of other faiths and sacred spaces I've only seen pictures of and others I might not even be able to imagine. Still, the ideas keep flooding my mind with a magnificent sense of unity in diversity.

I have been so excited to come here this morning and preach this sermon. I love being pastor of a congregation that shares a passion for inclusiveness and harmony. It's like Jesus prepared a place for us – this place.

But, as John Lennon expressed in "Imagine,"<sup>4</sup> we're not the only ones. We are part of the Reconciling Network of United Methodist congregations and other groups and individuals who share this dream along with other like-minded people in our denomination and other people all around the globe. Norman Rockwell conveyed a similar vision in his painting, "The Golden Rule."<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. powerfully shared his vision for inclusiveness in his speech, "I Have a Dream."<sup>6</sup> John Wesley began his sermon "Catholic Spirit" by writing, "It is allowed... that love is due to all mankind, the royal law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," carrying its own evidence to all that hear it."<sup>7</sup> St. Paul captured the yearning of humanity for unity in his letter to the Ephesians as he wrote,

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect [person], unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

The aspirational prayer of Christ embraced the highest possible vision for humanity as Jesus prayed in John 17, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."<sup>9</sup>

### **The places Christ is preparing for us are just what we need.**

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. (*John 14:2 KJV*)

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. (*John 14:2 NRSV*)<sup>10</sup>

This passage from John's Gospel contains the kernel of many conversations, sermons, articles, and books. The first six verses are especially comforting at times of bereavement. Yet the original context for this promise is the death of Christ and his return to those who were continuing to live. He would be returning to take them to their dwelling places in this life as well as in the life of the world to come.

Christ is preparing places for everyone, not just in heaven but every day in this life, too. There are many *kinds* of dwelling places. My mother used to keep "Mansion Over the Hilltop"<sup>11</sup> on the piano, and I can still see and hear her sing it every once in a while. The imagery of "many mansions" and "many dwelling places" communicates the many types of physical and spiritual places God makes available to us.

Cleland Boyd McAfee wrote in his hymn,<sup>12</sup>

There is a place of quiet rest...  
 A place where sin cannot molest...  
 A place of comfort sweet...  
 A place where we our Savior meet...  
 A place of full release...  
 A place where all is joy and peace...  
 Near to the heart of God.

### **Christ has prepared a place of full inclusion in the life and ministry of the church.**

Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. (*1 Peter 2:5 KJV*)<sup>13</sup>

Reginald Fuller, in his book *Preaching the Lectionary*, suggests that this passage is perhaps designed to inform new converts of “the nature of the community into which they are being admitted.”<sup>14</sup> Like the grand idea of America as a melting pot, Christ, as we say in our baptismal covenant, “has opened [the Church] to people of all ages, nations, and races.”<sup>15</sup> Our Inclusiveness statement, adopted unanimously by the church council five years ago, says,

We invite everyone to share fully in the worship services, life, ministry, and leadership of Briensburg United Methodist Church, inclusive of age, race, nationality, gender, LGBTQ, theology, politics, and legal status.<sup>16</sup>

I loved hearing this excerpt from the Coronation Prayer of King Charles, “Grant that I may be a blessing to all thy children, of every faith and belief, that together we may discover the ways of gentleness and be led into the paths of peace.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Christ prepares a place of wholeness, love, and mercy for all people.**

Make thy face to shine upon thy servant: save me for thy mercies' sake. (*Psalms 31:16 KJV*)

Look on your servant with kindness; save me in your constant love. (*Psalms 31:16 GNT*)<sup>18</sup>

It is not a far stretch to add to the examples Jesus gave in Matthew in his parable about the Judgement of the Nations, something like, “I was homeless, and ye gave me shelter, a refugee, and ye gave me sanctuary.” “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these... ye have done it unto me.”<sup>19</sup> Mercy and kindness urge nations and their citizenries to emulate Christ in preparing places for everyone, especially their most vulnerable populations.

Most people want to live in peace and harmony with each other and accord everyone the freedom and rights and fairness they want for themselves. In other words, “love thy neighbor as thyself.”<sup>20</sup> Sacramentally we express that longing as we gather around the Eucharistic Table. Gordon Thompson<sup>21</sup> taught in a class on Sacraments that for us as United Methodists, the mystery is not only what is happening *on* the communion table but also *around* the communion table in the hearts and minds of those who gather. We share this point of intersection, that we love God and desire to live in peace and harmony with each other.

We are invited to network with others who share the vision of Christ “that we all may be one.” We are invited to meet those who join us at each table we gather around in those places Christ prepares for us every day. We are invited to embrace what other people bring to the table, even as we share with them what we bring to the table.

And the Christians brought the bread.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.

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## A Place for All Y'all

Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on May 7, 2023, at Briensburg UMC  
Bible Readings for the 5th Sunday of Easter, Revised Common Lectionary  
Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

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### Acknowledgments

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The Revised Common Lectionary. Vanderbilt Divinity Library. 2008. [Web](#). 4 May 2023.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Psalm 23:5 (KJV)
- <sup>2</sup> John 14:2 (KJV)
- <sup>3</sup> Hard Rock Hotel Motto. "Love All, Serve All." Hard Rock Hotels. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>4</sup> John Lennon. "Imagine," 1971. John Lennon Official Website. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>5</sup> Norman Rockwell. "Golden Rule," 1961. Painting. Norman Rockwell Museum. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream," 1963. National Public Radio. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>7</sup> John Wesley. "Sermon 39 – Catholic Spirit." *John Wesley Sermons*. ResourceUMC. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:13 (KJV)
- <sup>9</sup> John 17:1 (KJV)
- <sup>10</sup> John 14:2 (KJV, NRSV)
- <sup>11</sup> Ira Stanphill. "Mansion Over the Hilltop," 1949. Word to Worship. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>12</sup> Cleland Boyd McAfee. "Near to the Heart of God," 1903. Hymnary.org. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 2:5 (KJV)
- <sup>14</sup> Reginald H. Fuller. *Preaching the Lectionary*, p. 83. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1984.
- <sup>15</sup> The United Methodist Church. "The Baptismal Covenant I." *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 88. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992.
- <sup>16</sup> Briensburg United Methodist Church. "Inclusiveness Statement," 2018. [Web](#). 7 May 2023.
- <sup>17</sup> King Charles III. "King Charles' Coronation." The Telegraph. [Web](#). 6 May 2023.
- <sup>18</sup> Psalm 31:16 (KJV, GNT)
- <sup>19</sup> Matthew 25:40 (KJV)
- <sup>20</sup> Matthew 22:39 (KJV)
- <sup>21</sup> Thompson Family. "Obituary of Rev. Dr. Gordon G. Thompson," 2009. Mayes Ward Dobbins Funeral Home. [Web](#). 7 May 2023.