



Stewardship II: Love Makes Room
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; September 20, 2026
 20th Sunday after Pentecost
 Luke 14:12-24; Hebrews 13:1-2

This morning's sermon is the second in our three-week stewardship campaign. Last Sunday, we began by considering what it means to *love this place enough to share it*. We started by remembering the table that welcomed us and the people who made room for us—but remembering is not where the story ends. If we pause and ponder how we've been welcomed—something may shift within us—something that heightens our awareness of others who might need a place just like this. So today we move from *Love Remembers* to *Love Makes Room*.

Luke chapter 14 opens with Jesus as a guest at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. We're told that he is being watched carefully. It's worth noting that while Jesus is being watched, he's doing a little watching of his own. He notices who is choosing the places of honor, who's been invited, and who hasn't. Then, as Jesus so often does, he turns the whole thing upside down. When you give a luncheon or a dinner, he says, don't invite only your friends, your relatives, or your wealthy neighbors—those who can return the favor. Instead, make room for those who have nothing to offer you at all. When one of the guests hears Jesus and responds with, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells a story about a great dinner where the people who were first invited chose not to attend. So, the invitation moves outward—to people who were overlooked, dismissed, pushed to the margins, or considered somehow less worthy of a place at the table.

I've often heard it said that we will be surprised by the people who ultimately show up in God's kingdom. Why? Because of the extravagance of God's grace. God's table is always wider than ours, and God's love keeps making room. And just when we think we have it all figured out—who is worthy of an invitation—and who isn't—we discover that God has been at work in places we couldn't see: bringing light into the hidden corners of a life, breathing Spirit into the cracks of a wounded soul, making a way where we thought there was no way. The God who surprises us with grace will surely surprise us again and again with whom God chooses to welcome.

Then there are those words from Hebrews: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Hospitality—not marketing—not advertising—not twisting someone's arm to get them to join the church. Hospitality—making room—pulling up another chair and saying: "Come sit with me." "Come see what happens here." "There's room for you."

I've served three Presbyterian churches in three different states in three very different settings. One was in Colonial Heights, Virginia, a small church that had once been right in the center of community life. But when the mall came, development moved to the other side of town, and the church found itself surrounded by older and increasingly neglected buildings. Another was First Presbyterian Church in Valdosta, Georgia, sitting on the corner of two busy streets in a downtown that was beginning to rediscover itself—old buildings being remodeled and repurposed, new restaurants opening on the ground level with living spaces above. And then there is this congregation, nestled in East Tennessee in a college town, with the college deeply steeped in a tradition that is not our own. Three churches. Three states. Three very different stories. Yet from my point of view, they've had something important in common. Each one, in its own way, seemed like the best-kept secret in town. And with each experience, I found myself wondering: Is this happening on purpose? I mean, is it a goal of Presbyterian churches to remain a secret?

Now, I understand why Presbyterians can be a little shy about evangelizing. We don't want to be like our pushy neighbors. We don't find it appropriate to knock on doors or hand out tracts or corner strangers with questions about whether they've accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. I get it. But there's a difference between being pushy and being invitational. There's a difference between trying to persuade someone to become something they're not and simply sharing, "I've found something here that matters to me, and I'd love for you to experience it, too."

At the heart of the matter is one question: If we love this place, why wouldn't we share it? Why wouldn't we? Why wouldn't we tell someone about the Blessing of the Animals, when there are people all around us who adore their pets and might find something beautiful in bringing them here to be blessed? Why wouldn't we tell someone that through our music program, we have learned to pivot and make room for all kinds of musicians and all kinds of music—including

special guests like Grace Notes Flute Choir, a local harpist, and a bagpiper? That we worship God through choir-led services as well as solos and ensembles, handbell and hand chime choirs, and musicians playing organ, piano, guitar, dulcimer, clarinet, trombone, and saxophone—and yes, even children with pan drums, ukuleles, and autoharps?

Why wouldn't we tell people that we've learned to laugh at ourselves and not take ourselves too seriously—so much so that one of our favorite services of the year is Holy Humor Sunday? Why wouldn't we tell them about the many ways this congregation serves beyond these walls, including through a mission focus each month and our very own Church Street Café—which started out as an opportunity to share a meal with our neighbors and transitioned into a monthly grocery giveaway? Why wouldn't we tell them that we're eager to have meaningful conversations about difficult cultural issues through book studies and something really wild and crazy called Pub Theology: Different Brews and Different Views which happens at 1907 Brewing Company?

Why wouldn't we tell people about the variety of programs we offer throughout the year—opportunities that build community, add richness to our faith journey, and give people a chance to simply enjoy being together? There's something for everyone: our Annual Church Picnic, 1-Day VBS for All Ages; Men's Breakfast; Threads of Friendship; Adulting Together for our 20s, 30s, and 40s age-group; Sunday School—with both an onsite multigenerational class and an offsite gathering at 60 Beans; the fall Pizza & Pumpkin Painting Party, the Annual Easter Egg Hunt and Luncheon, and times when our children make crafts, practice skits, or simply hang out to watch a movie.

And speaking of our children, they may be few, but they are mighty. In this sacred space, they are learning that church is not just a place where you consume something others have prepared for you. It's a place where they contribute, too—where their voices matter—where their hands matter—where they have a place at the table and they have something to bring to it. They are the church leaders of tomorrow, and they're learning, day by day, how to be the church. Why wouldn't we tell people that?

Why wouldn't we tell people that when you—or someone you love—receives an unsettling or frightening diagnosis, this community knows how to show up. That we become the hands and feet of Jesus in tangible ways. That we carry one another when the road becomes too heavy to walk alone. That we are also ready and waiting to celebrate with one another when good news arrives. And why wouldn't we tell them that this congregation has a female pastor—which, all by itself, says something about the kind of church you've chosen to be?

We don't have to brag about any of this. We don't have to make ourselves sound bigger or better than we are. We simply have to be willing to share what we've found here. Because that's what

love does. Love doesn't hoard good things. Love shares them. Think about the things you love most. A favorite restaurant. A beautiful hiking trail. A new video or board game. A book that changed your life. A song you can't stop listening to. A place where you feel at home. When we love something, we naturally want someone else to experience it. We say, "Hey, you've got to try this." "You need to check this out." "Come and see." We don't think of that as marketing. We think of it as sharing something we love.

Although our financial gifts matter, stewardship is not only about giving money. It's also about sharing the gift of belonging—tending to the future of something we love in order to assure that someone else can discover it. I'm not trying to heap guilt upon your head this morning. Rather, I'm trying to be honest. I am, after all, your pastor, and truth-telling—well, it's part of the gig. And the truth about vibrant churches is that they need new life. They need new voices, new questions, new ideas, new stories, new laughter. A table becomes truly alive when more voices join the conversation, and a church that stops inviting others to the table slowly forgets how to be the church.

So, when someone who has never sat at our table before pulls up a chair and asks, "What is this place?" we need to be ready with more than a sales pitch. We need to be ready with a story: *This is a place where I have found God's grace. This is a place where I found belonging. This is a place where I learned to ask better questions. This is a place where people showed up for me.* The future of First Presbyterian Church will not be secured by a clever marketing campaign. Instead, it will be built by people who love this place enough to share it. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.