

“The Table of Love”

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning marks a tremendous milestone in my pastoral journey, over 14 months ago you welcomed me into this place as an intern of the Church, and now here, on this day, we mark the conclusion of that journey as I soon depart for New Brunswick where I will begin the next chapter of my vocation as pastor of St. Peter's and Bethany Lutheran Churches. Such a statement is filled with a kaleidoscope of emotions – there is great joy and excitement in the adventure that awaits, but there is likewise great sadness in departing from the friends and family in Christ that Nathalie and I have had the great privilege and honor of getting to know. We will forever be thankful for you, the people of Zion, who made this internship such a richly wonderful and blessed experience.

Thank you for making space for us to learn and to share alongside of you. Thank you for the laughs, the support, and for going along with fundraising ideas that initially may have sounded wild and crazy. Thank you for the fellowship, the friendship, and thank you for the food. For it seems that food has so often brought us together to share laughter, stories, and glimpses of our individual selves with one another. For when we gather around the table, there is an intimacy that is created, an intimacy that goes beyond the surface, an intimacy that creates an opportunity for barriers of prejudice and apprehension to fall away, an intimacy that creates an opportunity for people to see one another through a lens of equality, a lens of mutuality, a lens that looks beyond the surface and begins looking into the hearts of one another.

Gathering around the table can be such a healing and life giving experience because having a seat at the table often represents equality. Sitting at the table means being in a position where one might be heard, where one might influence the decision making process.

So thank you, thank you for allowing us to join you at your table, both physically and metaphorically. Thank you for making room at your table.

Now with that being said, and before I tear up too much, I have one last job to do – one last sermon to share with you my beloved friends and companions in Christ.

This morning's reading from 2 Samuel chapter 9 might sound unfamiliar, this is likely because it is not a part of the regular lectionary cycle. Although the Revised Common Lectionary does an excellent job at covering the breadth of scripture contained within the Bible, it admittedly excludes some of the text. The story of Mephibosheth that we heard is one of these texts – but it is one of my favorite biblical encounters and it is from this narrative that I wish to preach my farewell sermon.

As the story recounts, David has become king of Israel following the death of King Saul. At that time, it was customary for the newly reigning king to kill all of the offspring belonging to the previous king and their household. But as 2 Samuel 9 clearly states, King David does the opposite; he acts contrary to the social expectations that are placed on him. Instead of killing Saul's grandson named Mephibosheth, David sends a servant to fetch him and to not only bring him back to the kingdom, but to give him a seat at the King's table where only those closest to the King were permitted to gather. Many interpret this narrative as being a story about David, a story about a good king who stands in contrast to many not so good kings of Jerusalem. But my argument is that this story is less about David and is more about God's active presence in the life of dear Mephibosheth.

Now, the name Mephibosheth literally means "from the mouth of shame." It is a fitting title for a man crippled from childhood. Without the honor and the riches of his grandfather Saul, Mephibosheth would have been relatively useless in the wider societal realm of his time. It is no surprise that he secluded to place that the text calls Lo-debar, a place of isolation outside of the kingdom. Many scholars believe Lo-debar offered a primitive style of living that lacked societal structure. And it is amidst this isolation that Mephibosheth sat crippled, probably telling stories about the good old days when he was a royal child in the kingdom of Jerusalem.

And like those who perhaps passed by and rolled their eyes at Mephibosheth's stories, biblical readers often gloss over Mephibosheth's narrative. But in the genealogical account of 1 Samuel 4, readers catch a glimpse of Mephibosheth prior to this 2 Samuel 9 passage. In 1 Samuel 4:4 readers learn that when news of Saul's death reached the kingdom, a maid servant grabbed Mephibosheth in an attempt to flee the kingdom. She was clearly aware of the societal custom to kill the offspring of your pre-successor. But in her haste, she dropped Mephibosheth and caused him to become crippled. In an attempt to preserve Mephibosheth's life, his maid servant drops him and so unfairly leaves him crippled in both feet.

Perhaps some of us can relate to the story of Mephibosheth? Perhaps we know what it feels like to physically or metaphorically be dropped amidst the injustice of this world? Dropped and left feeling crippled by societal systems or governmental programs, by family or friends, crippled by medical conditions or poverty, by mental illness or by heartbreak...unfair and unjust circumstances outside of one's control can so often leave people feeling dropped and crippled. Society is filled with the heartbreaking and crippling effects of injustice. There are in fact Mephibosheth's all over this world. But thanks be to God that the narrative need not end with injustice, but instead with God's almighty love and compassion. For in the story of David's kindness toward Mephibosheth, God's unwavering mercy and grace are made manifest, giving hope to all who might relate to Mephibosheth's story.

But mixed amidst this hope – there is also a challenge, a challenge to be like David, a challenge to make room at the table for all people, a challenge to let the promises of God be made manifest in and through the children of God – a challenge that is not always easy because there is often

great risk in welcoming strangers into the intimacy of one's table.

Likewise, although he was the King, it would not have been easy for David to welcome Mephibosheth to the table. David may have received political backlash and in all honesty, David was running the risk of inviting a potential enemy into his midst. There was a chance that Mephibosheth might have sought to avenge his grandfather or that he might have lingering unforgiveness for David who created the circumstances that left him crippled and lame. Yet knowing these risks, David still extends compassion – not only by creating a place for Mephibosheth at his table, but by sending someone to go and to fetch him, by sending someone to carry him a distance that he could not have traveled on his own. Just as Christ carried the burden of the cross to create a means for all to enter into the kingdom of God.

I'm sure that Mephibosheth had wild ideas running through his head. What does King David want with me? Is he going to kill me? When he first heard the news of David summoning him, he was perhaps fearful for his life and perhaps the reality of his situation worried him, how is a crippled man going to journey back to Jerusalem?

But David didn't send just anyone to fetch Mephibosheth, the text states that he sent a former servant of Mephibosheth's father, a face that Mephibosheth trusted and would recognize. David didn't send a random messenger, he sent the right messenger, Ziba who the story suggests carried Mephibosheth to the King's table.

I frequently wonder, how often are we presented with an opportunity to be like Ziba? To be like David? To not only make room at our table – but to carry one another when the circumstances of life become both crippling and prohibitive?

I know with confidence that I am who and where I am today because of the many people, who when I was too lame to walk, carried me and made room for me at their tables. I am who I am and where I am because of kind and generous people like you who have made a place for me and all of my imperfections at your table. Thank you.

Now, I have one last illustration that I would like to extract from today's narrative, an illustration that I hope highlights the fact that Mephibosheth was not so out of place at the King's table. Because what's often overlooked in reading this story is the other characters likely seated at the King's table. People, who like Mephibosheth, have a crippling narrative of their own. People, like Mephibosheth and all who gather at the Lord's table, who are given a seat regardless of what they have done or failed to do.

Seated at this table would have been Mephibosheth, the star of today's story.

Likewise, there would have been King David, a king who arranged for the death of a man named Uriah so that he could steal his wife Bathsheba. David, who was so crippled by lust that he was willing to kill just to have what he wanted.

And it would have been customary for Bathsheba to also have a seat at the king's table; a person who brought baggage of her own. A person perhaps filled with feelings of grief and resentment over the death of her husband Uriah. A person with first-hand experience in feeling objectified and mistreated.

Seated at the table also may have been Tamar, a daughter of King David and a victim of rape at the hand of her own brother Amnon.

And sitting at the same table may have been Jonadab, Tamar's cousin, the person who advised Amnon on how to manipulate and take advantage of his sister.

And to add to the chaos, there likely would have been Absalom, a child of David who was so infuriated with David's unwillingness to punish Amnon that he took justice into his own hands and killed Amnon.

The king's table...a table full of people struggling with quarrels and conflicts, a table surrounded by people who knew the crippling effect of injustice.

There they would have sat, a murderer, a rapist, a manipulator and a victim of rape....a crippled man...a person objectified as a possession...and a person who once appeared to be a perfect king but is now guilty of murder, lust, and injustice.

But, look closely...

because the beauty of this story, is that when they are seated together behind the table, no one sees what is under the table...no one sees the baggage that each person has hidden any more than they see the crippled feet of Mephibosheth... For when we are gathered together at the table of mercy, it's not about what's under the table, it's about the love of God that gathers us despite shortcoming and failure, a love that makes room at the table for all people, seating them in a spirit of unity and grace – and suddenly, in the light of God's love, there is perfect equality because the focus is not on what's under the table – the focus is on God who is perfect in compassion and love. The focus is on the love of God witnessed in and through the gift of Jesus Christ who makes room at the table for all to come.

I pray that God help us learn from the story of Mephibosheth; that the children of God might continually open their hearts and make room at the table for those who are so unjustly rejected by the circumstances and political forces of this life. That all might come to both acknowledge and to experience God's loving forgiveness – because as Martin Luther often reminded, seats at God's table are neither warranted or earned by human action, but are given freely through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so, as I speak this final internship sermon, I want to say thank you. Thank you for making

room at your table for me, thank you for being a continual reminder of God's perfect love that is with and for all people. Thank you for being the body of Christ and for treating me with equality and love.

I pray that you will continue to welcome strangers to your table – that Zion will be a light of hope amidst a seemingly dark world – that your table will be open to those who come from afar and to those who live and dwell within this community. And most importantly, I pray that your tables will be open to one another – that the family of God will not be divided by gossip or politics, that you will continually treat one another with the equality and love that is ours both now and forevermore because of Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord.

Amen.