

ROOM IN THE HOUSE

2 Kings 4:8-10

John 14:1-6

Make space in your life for the things of God.

A sermon preached by
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One of the many things I learned about when Carey and Abby came into my life was HGTV. I had never watched HGTV, but when Abby was in high school, it was her favorite channel. Whenever the TV was on, if we weren't watching anything specific, it was on HGTV.

Probably their favorite show was "Fixer Upper" starring Chip and Joanna Gaines from Waco, TX. The Gaines' specialty was taking rundown houses and turning them into showplaces of style and design. I came to enjoy the show myself before too long.

My personal acquaintance with house remodeling came when I was a boy growing up in Camden, Arkansas. Sometime in the mid-60's, my parents remodeled the house I grew up in. They totally redid the kitchen and took in part of the carport (not garage) to build a laundry room. My mama got all new appliances and a new washing machine and an electric dryer. No more hanging clothes out on the line to dry! My favorite part was that they installed a booth in the breakfast area. It was like going to a restaurant every time we sat down to eat. Only later did I realize that by putting my brother and me next to the wall, they could keep us in place until the meal was over.

I still remember the awe I felt over the new expansion, the smell of the new wood and paint, and the joy my mom expressed at her new kitchen and laundry room.

Remodeling is not a new phenomenon, even back to the 1960's. Building projects have been going on ever since humans came out of their caves, I suppose. I was reminded this week of a Scripture about a remodeling project that I had not thought about in a very long time. Bob Miller shared with me a letter from Dr. Leonard Sweet, the preacher who came for our 175th anniversary celebration back in 2017. Dr. Sweet was thanking Bob and Nadine for their hospitality and support, and he mentioned the hospitality of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4. Elisha was a prophet who succeeded the prophet Elijah as the spiritual leader of Israel in the 9th century BCE. Shunem was a village near the Jezreel Valley, sort of the "action alley" of the Old Testament. So Elisha would frequently pass through Shunem on his way to Samaria or Mt. Carmel or some place where his spiritual leadership was needed.

The Shunammite woman fed Elisha when he came through town. She was wealthy, so she asked her husband to build a room on their roof where Elisha would have a place to stay—a nice place with a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp—the whole nine yards. We never learn her name, but her generous spirit has lived on for almost three thousand years.

When the early Methodist circuit riders were traveling around England and the frontier of America, the Methodist families would often have what they called "prophet's chambers," guest rooms in their homes dedicated to housing the traveling preachers.

In fact, that tradition found expression in the early history of Christianity as Christians made spaces not only for traveling evangelists, but for any traveler who needed a place to stay. The Letter to the Hebrews encourages the believers, “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*”¹ They wanted to make room for the stranger, because the stranger was Christ: “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*”²

St. John Chrysostom, one of the early Church Fathers, suggested that every Christian home should make a place for the stranger in their midst: “How many of the brethren are strangers? ... Make for yourself a guest-chamber in your own house: set up a bed there, set up a table there and a candlestick. Gain a victory over the Church. ... Surpass us in liberality: have a room, to which Christ may come, say, ‘This is Christ’s cell; this building is set apart for him.’”³

So here is an idea that goes back through the early Methodists to the early Christians to the Shunammite woman in a little village in Israel 900 years before Christ. Make room for the presence of God in your midst. Make a space for ministry to happen in your life. Add a room if you need to; welcome the stranger, and thereby welcome Christ, into your home.

As we think today about the themes of generosity, hospitality, and stewardship, I want to apply the “Shunammite principle.” How do we make room for Christ? How do we make space for the things of God in our lives? How do we welcome Jesus?

We have many rooms in our houses, don’t we? Not physical rooms, necessarily, but many spaces for the things that are important to us. We have places for family, job, school, hobbies, money, time, talents, causes we’re passionate about. There are many rooms we deal with on a daily basis. If you’re worshipping with us today, you probably have a room for church and for Jesus already. Maybe creating a better space for the things of God is not going to be a total overhaul for you; it’s more like re-decorating your space or a slight re-model. But if you haven’t created that space yet, maybe you need to do some new construction. Add a room to the house and give Jesus a place to stay with you.

Or maybe to make room for God, you need to demo something that is blocking your relationship with God. Something needs to be torn down—some sin, bitterness, hostility, conflict, addiction—before you can make a space for God. It can be done. The most fun part of shows like “Fixer-Upper” is when they pull out the sledge hammers and knock down a wall, right? If something is in the way between you and God, clear it out and create some open space.

As we make space for God, we can look at our basic commitments of membership in the church. We make space for God through our prayers. The more time we spend

in conversation with God, the bigger our space for God becomes, the greater our capacity for relationship.

We make space for God through our presence. Being with the people of God has been a challenge in the pandemic. Maybe your presence is mostly online or on the radio at the present moment. But however you're here, you're here, and your presence is creating a space for God to be at work. You can also be present by phone or Zoom with others in the faith community. You can be with your brothers and sisters in your small groups, to maintain those connections where Jesus is present with us.

We can make room for God in our gifts. Our practice of generosity creates a space where we express our love for God. We exercise our spiritual priorities by giving our financial support to the church. Putting God first in our financial priorities puts our whole house in order and sets us on a firm foundation.

We can make space through our service. God has given us opportunities to serve the church and community, and when we do that, Christ is in our midst. Again, when we do these things for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do them for Jesus. This, too, is more of a challenge in the pandemic, but it can be done. Look at the tremendous response to our Ingathering yesterday.

And finally, we can make a room for Christ in our witness. There are so many lost, lonely, hurting, bewildered, overwhelmed people around us. This is a great time for a word of faith to be spoken by someone like you. If you can say a word of peace and love and hope and joy to someone who needs encouragement, it does two things. It helps that person, and it reinforces within you what you believe and hold on to and depend on through this crisis.

Prayers, presence, gifts, service, witness: this is how we make space for God in our lives. This is how we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. This is how we express our hospitality and generosity both to God and to the world. This is the way we practice good stewardship with every aspect of our lives.

Then we have Jesus in the house. It's very interesting to listen to how Jesus talks about living *in* us and living *with* us as his disciples. In the last discourse of Jesus in the Gospel of John, Jesus talks about his ongoing relationship with the disciples in two ways.

Jesus is clear that he is about to die and be raised again. He had predicted that for some time. This was very troubling to the disciples. But Jesus promised that after he was gone, he would return to them and live in them by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, ...I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ...On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ...Abide in me as I abide in you.*"⁴ Paul called this "*Christ in you, the*

hope of glory.”⁵ When you make space in your life for Jesus, he comes and lives in your house. The Holy Spirit dwells in you.

But Jesus also talks about making a place for you in his house. Responding to the anxiety of the disciples, he says, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*”⁶ What Jesus is talking about there is the ancient Middle Eastern custom of weddings. Once a man and a woman were betrothed or promised to one another in marriage, the husband went to his father’s house and added on living quarters for him and his bride. You can still see these structures in the ruins of the Holy Land today. When the room was finished, the groom would go and get the bride; the wedding would be celebrated; and the couple would start their new life together.⁷

Jesus used this language of marriage to reassure his disciples that even though they would be separated for a while, they would one day be together forever. If we make room for Christ in our lives, Christ will make a room for us in his Father’s house. He will complete the construction and bring us home one day, and we will be together forever. What a blessing that will be!

Let’s circle back to the Shunammite woman. When she made a place for the man of God to stay in her house, she also received a great blessing. The woman’s husband was old, and they had no children. Elisha informed her that in a year, she would have a son. She responded, “Don’t mess with me.” But in a year, she was blessed with a child. Then when the child was a few years old, he got sick and died. The Shunammite woman went to Elisha for help, and he came and breathed life back into the boy. A few years later, the woman and her son had to relocate because of a drought, but when they came back home, her land and home were restored to her because of her relationship with Elisha.⁸ Over and over again, she was blessed, and it all started when she made a place in her home for the prophet.

We can draw the lesson from the Shunammite woman and from Jesus: when we make space in our lives for the things of God, we will be blessed beyond our wildest imagination. When we get our spiritual house in order, it will be a witness to the world and a reflection of the goodness of God.

Jim Petersen is a former pastor and missionary with the Navigators organization. He tells the story of Mario, a young man from South America who was a Marxist intellectual and a philosophical type. But after four years of ministry and Bible study, he became a Christian. A couple of years after his conversion, Mario asked Jim, “Do you remember what it really was that made me decide to become a Christian?”

Petersen thought it might have been their Bible studies and philosophical discussions. But Mario surprised him. “Remember that first time I stopped by your house? We were on our way someplace together, and I had a bowl of soup with you and your family. As I sat there observing you, your wife, and your children, and how you related to each other, I asked myself, ‘When will I have a relationship like this with my fiancé?’ When I realized that the answer was ‘never,’ I concluded I had to become a Christian for the sake of my own survival.”

Petersen remembered the occasion. He remembered his children behaving badly and his frustration at having to correct them in front of Mario. Yet Mario saw the grace of Christ binding that family together. Petersen made the comment: “We tend to see the weaknesses and incongruities in our lives, and our reaction is to recoil at the thought of letting outsiders get close enough to see us as we really are. Even if our assessment is accurate, it is my observation that any Christian who is sincerely seeking to walk with God, in spite of all his flaws, is reflecting something of Christ.”⁹

That is to say, nobody’s house is perfect. But if you make room in your house for the things of God, your life will reflect the light of Christ, and you will make an impact.

Maybe your life is a fixer-upper. Maybe you need some serious demolition and a total rebuild. Or maybe you just need to do a small remodel to freshen up your faith. Whatever you need, let me just encourage you today. Do the project! Build your life into a showplace of stewardship, a palace of hospitality, a temple of generosity. Make space in your life for the things of God, and everyone will see that God is alive in you. Then your life will make an eternal difference.

¹ Hebrews 13:2.

² Matthew 25:40.

³ St. John Chrysostom, “Homily XLV on the Acts of the Apostles 20:32,” quoted in letter by Leonard Sweet to Bob and Nadine Miller, November 1, 2020.

⁴ John 14:16-20, 15:4.

⁵ Colossians 1:27.

⁶ John 14:1-3.

⁷ <https://www.gotquestions.org/marriage-customs.html>.

⁸ 2 Kings 4:11-37, 8:1-6.

⁹ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 95-96.