



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

## All Are Welcome

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 14:15-24

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Jan. 21, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**F**rom the earliest days of the church, the single most profound conundrum was over the question of: Who is this gospel for? Is this gospel, this good news of Jesus of Nazareth, only for Jews? Or could it possibly be for Buffalo Bills' fans? This parable from Jesus gives an answer. Everyone is welcome at the table. Especially those you might not expect. The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Surprise!

In his book, "How to Know a Person, The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen," published last year, David Brooks writes: In every crowd, there are diminishers and there are illuminators.<sup>1</sup>

Diminishers make people feel small and unseen. They see other people as things to be used, not as persons to be befriended. They stereotype and ignore. They are so involved with themselves that other people are just not on their radar screen.

Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained (or trained themselves) in the craft of understanding others. They know what to look for and how to ask the right questions at the right time. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, deeper, respected, lit up.

We have been far from perfect to be sure, but in these 75 years of our existence as a congregation, as a body of Christ, time and again, when we have had the choice, I think Village Church has chosen to illuminate rather than diminish.

We were officially chartered as a congregation in 1949. Nineteen years earlier, the Presbyterian Church allowed the ordination of women as elders and deacons. For the first 14 years of our life, all of our elders—the leaders of the congregation—were men. All of them. Then, in 1963, Village Church nominated and elected our first woman to be an el-

der: Phyllis Matchette. Not everyone supported her election. The minutes of the congregational meeting note that the vote was not unanimous. In fact, several elders on the Session did not support her election.

One of the moments when the elders of the church are most visible is when communion is served. There they are, in their suits and ties, standing in the aisles, passing the bread and juice. Before the first day Phyllis was to serve communion, one of the elders suggested that because the plates of bread and the trays of juice are so heavy, to spare her the effort, why doesn't the new elder join the other ladies and help prepare the bread and juice trays the night before? To his credit, Elder Bill Degan spoke up and said that Phyllis had been elected an elder "just like the rest of us" and that Sunday, for the first time, a woman stood in the aisles serving the bread of heaven and the cup of grace to all. Illumination.

In the 1940s, when Prairie Village and the surrounding neighborhoods were developed, buyers of the new homes signed a housing covenant that among other things, prohibited the sale of homes to minorities—specifically, Blacks and Jews. In 1972, the Sewing family was the first Black family to move into the Fairway community just north of the church. Dr. Bob Meneilly visited the family and assured them they would be welcomed at Village Presbyterian Church. This angered some persons in the church and in the community. The Sewings came and found a church home here. Today Henry Sewing is serving as ruling elder for a second time on our Session and is our stated clerk. Illumination.

From the earliest days of the Presbyterian Church here in the United States, it was common practice to exclude children from participating in communion until they had been through confirmation as adolescents. The consensus was that children were too

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1 David Brooks. *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.* (2023).

young to fully understand and appreciate the significance of the Lord's Supper. Sadly, persons with cognitive disabilities were also excluded for the same reason. In 1985, thanks to the leadership of Christian educators and teachers, Village Church began to include children and all persons in the celebration of Lord's Supper on the premise that none of us fully understand and appreciate the significance of the Lord's Supper and in some ways, perhaps children understand it more fully than adults. Illumination.

In 1956, the first woman was ordained as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. In 1984, Rev. Diane Cooke was called as the first woman to serve as a pastor at Village Church. Women had served in a variety of leadership roles, but Rev. Cooke was the first woman installed as a pastor. She started working in youth ministry, then adult discipleship then evangelism. She was the first of a long line of women. They include such remarkable leaders as Rev. Sandra Smith, Rev. Diane Quaintance, Rev. Dr. Cynthia Holder Rich, Rev. Meg McLaughlin, Rev. Jenny McDevitt, Rev. Hallie Hottle. Today, Rev. Sally Wright, Rev. Melanie Hardison, Rev. Anna Owens, and Rev. Alice Whitson are four of the seven pastors serving Village Church. Illumination.

In 1996, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirmed that homosexuality was incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ and that homosexual persons were not allowed be leaders in the church. In response, in 1997, Dr. Robert Bohl, who was senior pastor here at Village Church—along with Dr. John Buchanan, senior pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago—formed the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, to advocate

and fight for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in the life of the church. In 2011, the Presbyterian Church moved to welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons as deacons, elders, and pastors. In 2014, the church allowed pastors and congregations to celebrate same-sex weddings. Today we are grateful to have Rev. Sally Wright and Rev. Alice Whitson serving us as pastors. Illumination.

Jesus tells a parable where a great banquet is set and the 'right' people are invited to come: the wealthy landowner, the livestock owner, the one who can afford a week-long wedding celebration. But they all decline. And the table expands and grows.

Village Church, we are far from perfect and we are not always quick. But looking back at our history, time and again, when faced with a choice, to diminish persons or to illuminate them, we have chosen illumination. To shine the brightness of our care on people and make them feel bigger, deeper, respected, lit up with light of Jesus Christ.

Remember this. This is important. This week, in every interaction, you can diminish a person or you can illuminate them. That kid in fourth period who no one seems to like. Your spouse or sister or brother or child or parent when they are working your last nerve. That clerk at Hy-Vee. Your supervisor or co-worker. You have a choice. You can either diminish them or illuminate them. Time and again, Jesus illuminates. So we do, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.