A Place We Did Not Earn

October 25, 2026

Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18; Matthew 22:34–46

Someone stands beside an empty chair at a church supper and asks, “Is anybody sitting here?” Sometimes the answer is, “I’m saving it.” Usually, we are saving it for someone we love. Someone whose company feels easy. We have been looking forward to seeing them. There is nothing wrong with that.

But consider the person with a hand on the chair, waiting for an answer. They may have needed a little courage just to ask. To one person, it is a chair saved for a friend. To the other, it is the question: Is there a place for me among you?

A lawyer asks Jesus which commandment is greatest. Matthew tells us he is testing Jesus. But the question itself matters: What holds the life of faith together? Jesus answers from Israel’s Scriptures. Love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind. Then he joins to it a commandment from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The law and the prophets hang on these two.

We might prefer a love for God that leaves our arrangements undisturbed. We could worship sincerely and keep deciding for ourselves who gets close. Jesus places our neighbor inside the life we offer to God. We cannot give God our whole heart and reserve the right to treat someone as though they do not matter.

Leviticus makes this practical. Judge fairly. Do not slander. Do not take revenge or nurse a grudge. Later in that chapter, God extends the command to the foreigner living among them. Love that person as yourself. Remember that you were foreigners in Egypt.

God has already brought these people out of bondage. Their freedom is a gift. Now they are learning to live together as people who have received it. Remember what it was like to need a place. Do not forget once you have one.

That is easy to forget. We grow familiar with a community. People expect us. We relax. That belonging is a blessing. But we can become so comfortable that we stop remembering what it takes to walk into a room alone.

And sometimes the person we struggle to welcome is someone we already know. Someone disappoints us, and we begin keeping a record. They speak, and we hear the old argument. They offer to help, and we question the motive. Before long, that record becomes the person.

It is a lonely thing to be trapped inside somebody else’s settled opinion of you. Most of us have wanted someone to look again. When I speak sharply, I know how tired I am. When you speak sharply, I may decide what kind of person you are. I give myself a whole story. You get a label.

Love your neighbor as yourself: allow that the person before you has a whole story, too. That includes telling the truth. Leviticus calls for correcting a neighbor instead of harboring hatred. Love can require a difficult conversation, or a boundary that protects someone from harm. But we are never given ownership of another person’s worth.

We know how much this love can ask. Some of us are tired from caring for someone. Some carry an injury that has never been acknowledged. Where will this love come from?

Our Gospel reading turns toward that question when Jesus asks about the Messiah. How can the one they call David’s son also be the one David calls Lord? Knowing the

commandment is not the whole encounter. We must reckon with the one standing before us.

Look at how this Lord loves. Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus shares a meal with his disciples. Betrayal is coming. They will desert him. Peter's confidence will collapse before morning. Jesus takes bread and gives it to them. Then he offers the cup. "Drink from it, all of you." He speaks of his blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus gives himself for people whose love will fail him.

And after the cross, after God raises him from death, he calls those disciples to meet him in Galilee. He entrusts them with his good news. "I am with you always," he promises. Their failure has not exhausted his mercy.

This is the mercy that has gathered us. Christ receives people whose love is unfinished. We can confess. We can ask for help. Our place with him rests in his faithfulness. At Christ's table, every place is a gift.

We can imagine we are the ones who belong, graciously deciding whether to include somebody else. But Christ has welcomed both of us. I may have sat here for years. I am still here by grace. I cannot make your place depend on pleasing me.

Here at Valley, someone can walk into the middle of our happiness and still feel alone. We know whom we are looking for. They may be wondering whether anyone is looking for them.

Our Stephen Ministers practice the patient work of listening. That work belongs to the whole congregation. Love makes room for someone's voice, and pays attention when their words reveal a need.

As stewardship season approaches, our giving helps sustain that worship and care. We give because this shared life matters. Nobody's place depends on what they can contribute. You do not have to remain useful to keep your place in the body of Christ. You belong when you need somebody to come and sit beside you.

After worship, notice who is standing just outside the conversation. Make room for that person to become someone you know. And if you are the one standing at the edge, hear the promise that holds this church together.

Jesus knew his disciples would fail him, and he gave them the bread. After they deserted him, the risen Christ called them to meet him again. Their failure did not exhaust his mercy. Neither has ours.

The Lord who gathers this church knows the whole of your life. There is a place for you in his love. He has already given himself to make it yours.

Amen.