

Find Your Place

Matthew 11:28–30; Ephesians 2:19–22

The Cafeteria Feeling

Think back to walking into a school cafeteria for the first time, tray in hand, scanning a room where every table already looked claimed. The athletes had their table; the band kids were at another. Those people were already friends. There were the students who had known each other forever. They already had their group. And you stood there running a quiet calculation: Where can I sit? Will anyone make room? Am I about to sit down where I'm not wanted?

It's amazing how lonely you can feel in a room full of people.

That feeling doesn't stay behind in middle school. It just changes rooms. It shows up on your first day at a new job, when everyone else already knows how things work around here. It shows up when you move into a new neighborhood in Monroe and realize everyone already has their people. It shows up on the sideline at your kid's game, watching the other parents laugh together like old friends. It shows up after a big life change — the kids move out, you retire, a marriage ends, someone you love dies, or you become a caregiver — and the people who used to fill your days simply aren't there anymore. I experienced it at a gathering of clergy earlier this month, looking for people to sit with at lunch time and realizing everybody else seemed to know each other well.

And sometimes it shows up when you walk into a church. The questions are a little different, but that same cafeteria feeling is still there: **Is there a place for me here?** And underneath that, a deeper question: **What would I have to do to deserve one?**

The Pressure to Earn Your Place

So much of life teaches us that a place has to be earned. At work, we're only as good as our last project. As parents, we feel pressure to get every decision right, while

still getting everyone fed, to practice on time, and through whatever crisis is happening tonight. We do the math on the mortgage or the rent, on gas and groceries that cost more than they used to, and wonder if one unexpected car repair or medical bill will throw everything off. Some of us are raising kids who still need us while also caring for parents who now need us in a completely different way; we're checking the work inbox, the ParentSquare, Google Classroom, and ProgressBook school apps, and a parent's medical portal in the same ten minutes, and still somehow trying to get dinner on the table.

On top of all of that, we're surrounded by messages that say keep up, do more, be better. Scroll for thirty seconds, and it can seem like everyone else has a cleaner house, an easier marriage, a happier kid, a more impressive job. Nobody posts the argument that happened five minutes before the family picture. Nobody posts the dishes piled up at 10:30 at night. Nobody posts, "I sat in the driveway for three extra minutes because I wasn't ready to go back inside and deal with one more thing." But those moments are just as real as the highlight reel ... more real, actually.

Underneath that pressure, a lot of us carry a belief we would never say out loud:

If I stop performing, maybe I stop mattering. If people knew the whole truth about me, maybe they wouldn't want me at the table.

Let's take a moment right now to notice. Take a slow breath. You don't need to say anything out loud or share with anyone; just notice. What is the one thing you work hardest to hide, out of fear the people would think less of you if they knew. Hold that thought. We'll come back to it.

"Come"

Into a world full of that kind of pressure, Jesus said something surprisingly simple. In the book of Matthew, which tells about his life, he says, "Come to me, all you who are

weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Notice the very first word. Not "improve." Not "get your act together." Not "solve your problems first." Not "become more religious." Just: come.

Notice who the invitation is for, too. Jesus doesn't say, "Come to me, all of you who have your lives well managed." He says, "Come to me, all of you who are weary." Tired people. People carrying more than they can hold. People wondering how much longer they can keep this pace. That means your exhaustion isn't something you have to hide before you show up. Your doubts, your mistakes, your unanswered questions — none of it disqualifies you. You don't have to pretend you're doing better than you actually are.

Come. Not "improve." Not "get it together." Just — come.

That doesn't mean life suddenly gets easy once you show up. Jesus never promises a life free of hard days. The mortgage is still due. The diagnosis is still real. Your kids still need raising. Your parents may still need care. The hard conversation still has to happen. Grief still hurts. There are responsibilities none of us can simply walk away from.

So, Jesus adds something. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." A yoke is an old farming tool: a wooden crossbar that joined two animals together so they could pull a load side by side instead of alone. When Jesus talks about a yoke, he isn't promising you'll never carry weight again. He's saying, learn from me how to carry it, and notice that you're not pulling it by yourself. The rest he offers isn't a vacation from responsibility. It's relief from the exhausting belief that everything depends on you, and only you.

Gentle, Not Harsh

Jesus goes on to describe what kind of teacher he is: "I am gentle and humble in heart." That detail matters, because plenty of us have had harsh voices in our lives.

Maybe it was a parent, a coach, an old church experience, or just our own inner critic telling us there's always one more standard to hit before we're good enough. But Jesus doesn't stand over someone who's struggling and ask, "what's wrong with you?" He offers a hand instead.

That doesn't mean nothing needs to change. Jesus does say, "learn from me," and learning means growth: relationships that need repairing, habits worth reconsidering, apologies that still need to be made, people who still need forgiving. But notice the order. The change doesn't start with "prove yourself first."

Picture someone carrying real shame: a broken relationship, a bankruptcy, an addiction, a season of life they'd rather forget. They slip into the back row half-expecting questions they don't want to answer. But what if someone just listened, without repeating it to anyone else? That's not ignoring what happened. It's creating the kind of room where the truth can finally be told out loud, which is usually where real change actually starts.

Change starts with being accepted — not with proving yourself first.

You Already Belong

This isn't only about you and God working things out privately, either. In a letter to a divided community, the apostle Paul, who was an important early Christian missionary around the Mediterranean, wrote to people who knew exactly what it felt like to be outsiders. They were split by old religious, cultural, and social lines about who was really "in." Paul tells them that because of Jesus, those old dividing lines no longer decide who has a seat. "You are no longer strangers and aliens," he writes — no longer outsiders looking in — "but you are citizens with the saints," meaning full members, not second-class guests, alongside every other person who has ever tried to follow God,

“and also members of the household of God,” which meant, not just part of an organization, but part of a family.

Then Paul switches pictures and describes people as parts of a building God is putting together, each one joined to the next. Notice what that means: nobody is the whole building, and nobody is expected to be. We need each other. That's as true in Monroe as it was two thousand years ago, whether your family has been rooted here for generations or you moved into a new subdivision last spring, the invitation is the same.

I'd like to invite you to turn to someone near you – if you're worshiping from home, think of a person to share this with later. What is one thing you're thankful for about a community that has made room for you? If you're still looking for that kind of place, share one hope you have for finding it. Becky and I appreciate how this congregation made space by welcoming and loving our children and helping them belong. Take a moment to share briefly.

Making Room for Each Other

Part of why life feels so exhausting is that we keep trying to carry things that were never meant to be carried alone. “I've got it.” “I don't want to bother anyone.” “Other people have bigger problems than mine.” Meanwhile, we're barely holding it together. There's real strength in saying instead, “I need some help,” or calling someone and saying, “could you just listen for a few minutes?”

Picture a man who just lost his wife after forty years of marriage. The funeral is full, the casseroles keep coming, and three weeks later, the house is unbearably quiet. Sunday mornings are the hardest part of the week because he's always sat beside her. At first, he slips in late and leaves early. Then someone notices, not with pity, just steady friendship: “Come, sit with us.” A phone call on a random Tuesday. A standing invitation to lunch once a month. Slowly, showing up gets a little easier, not because the grief is gone, but because he isn't carrying it by himself anymore.

Grace usually looks pretty ordinary. It looks like a neighbor watching your kids so you can make it to a doctor's appointment. It looks like a coworker covering your shift without making it a big deal. It looks like someone sitting with you in a hospital waiting room after everyone else has gone home. It looks like another parent telling you, "Your kid is fine, we're glad you're here," instead of giving you a look when your child is having a rough morning. It looks like a text on a Tuesday that says, "I was thinking about you; how are you really doing?"

Sometimes grace looks like a casserole, a text, or someone simply staying in the room.

That's what community shaped by Jesus is meant to look like — not another cafeteria where you have to figure out if you're allowed to sit down, not a place where everyone pretends life is working perfectly, but a place where grace makes room. A place where tired people can show up honestly, where questions are welcome, and where nobody has to carry grief by themselves.

Your Next Step

Once you discover there's room for you, the natural next step is learning to make room for someone else. So, this week's invitation depends on where you find yourself. If you're the one feeling weary right now, your invitation is simply to receive. Stop trying so hard to prove you're okay, and tell the truth to God and to at least one person you trust. Acknowledge what you're carrying or struggling with – it could be at work, at home, in your health, in a relationship. Then share it honestly and openly with God and someone else you trust.

If you already have a seat, that is, you know the names, you know the routines, you've been rooted here a while, your invitation is to look around. Who's still standing there holding their tray? Maybe it's the parent who feels behind in every area of life and

assumes everyone else has it together, doing their best not to let the kids' noise in church become one more thing to apologize for, even though we might choose to hear it proof of life in the household of God. Maybe it's the person who just moved to town for a job or after a divorce and doesn't have anyone yet, greeted warmly for thirty seconds and then left to find their own seat, because it appears everyone else already has "their people." This applies well beyond a Sunday morning, too: it's the new coworker eating lunch alone, the family who just moved onto your street, the parent standing by themselves at pickup. The move can be small: learn a name, start a conversation, send the text, invite someone to lunch.

Come

Jesus says to weary people, come. Come tired. Come uncertain. Come with questions. Come with regrets. Come without pretending. And when you do, something begins to shift. You realize you were never actually standing unnoticed at the edge of the room. You don't have to earn that kind of attention, and you don't have to prove you deserve a seat. That room has already been made.

Then, slowly, the people who have received that kind of welcome start to become the people who offer it. Until the next person walks in, looks around nervously the way we all have at some point, and discovers that someone has noticed them. Someone moves over. Someone smiles. And someone says:

"There's room here. Come sit with us."
