

## Rehoboth

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Genesis 26:17-31

### **Genesis 26:17-31**

<sup>17</sup>So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. <sup>18</sup>Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. <sup>19</sup>But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, <sup>20</sup>the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, "The water is ours." So he called the well Esek [which means "contention"], because they contended with him. <sup>21</sup>Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah [which means "enmity"]. <sup>22</sup>He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth [which means "broad places"], saying, "Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." <sup>23</sup>From there he went up to Beer-sheba. <sup>24</sup>And that very night the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake." <sup>25</sup>So he built an altar there, called on the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well. <sup>26</sup>Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army. <sup>27</sup>Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" <sup>28</sup>They said, "We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you <sup>29</sup>so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord." <sup>30</sup>So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. <sup>31</sup>In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths; and Isaac set them on their way, and they departed from him in peace.

It took three times for them to get it right, this digging of the ancient wells. With the first one there was fighting about whose water it was, and so again with the second. I don't really know what it took to dig a well in that place and time—to dig deep enough by hand that water would flow up from the ground—but it couldn't have been easy. To have the success foiled by quarreling and turf wars, to start over again digging when water already had been found, to have the wells given names that forever memorialized the conflict and not the achievement—Isaac's servants must have been frustrated after the first time, not to mention the second.

But then with the third well, somehow, unexplained, there is no quarrel between Isaac and the Philistines. And so it is given the name Rehoboth: "broad places" or "the Lord has made room." From this life-giving well, forged in peace, comes fruitfulness. It makes room not only for Isaac and his family to move forward on their own path, but also enables a renewed covenant of peace and a shared feast between Isaac and Abimelech.

World Communion Sunday is this vision that at least for a moment, for one Sunday, we can set aside all that divides the Christian faith—all the quarrels that we have with one another, the turf wars, the theological and political and practical differences between us—and come together as the one body we are meant to be around the life-giving table of our shared Lord. Communion is, for us, that "broad place" where we can glimpse the kingdom of God. A table prepared, astonishingly, for each of us. That *we* are invited, sinners though we are, is the radical, life-giving good news we receive each time the table is set before us. That *all* are invited is the exacting charge that confronts us each time the table is set. The grace and forgiveness and newness that God gives us at this table are broader than we

can fathom, and certainly broader than we deserve. And each time we conclude the meal, we pray that we might go forth to serve Christ *in our neighbor*. We only get it truly right when we work to end conflict, when we move from contention and enmity to making room, when we covenant with one another—across the pews, in our communities, throughout our nation, and around the world—to move forward in peace.

Sometimes it seems like such a fanciful notion that we might ever get it right. Again and again and again, we forge wells from contention and enmity. We pursue conflict over reconciliation in our homes, communities, even in our church. We permit the ongoing separation of Christ's church and mourn little as it continues to fracture. We allow ourselves to be divided by race and religion and economic status and fail to do the hard work to build relationships and inclusive neighborhoods. We take pride in military power and rationalize its terrible costs, where the deaths of doctors and patients and children are somehow accepted collateral consequences. We prioritize again and again and again and again guns that destroy life, and so participate again and again and again and again in denying fruitfulness to those killed before they had a chance to drink from the Rehoboth well.

Can you recount the broad places in your life? What is your testimony about how God has made room for you, so that you might be fruitful? Who are the people that have led you to the table, who have done the digging for you, who have been neighbor to you, who have reconciled with you? Not just those known to you by name, but those who perhaps in another time, or another place, toiled and made peace so that you might prosper here and now. Think of the gift that has been.

What can you do, then, to make a broad place for others, so that *they* can be fruitful? Yesterday, many in our presbytery gathered at Brentwood Presbyterian Church for Presbytery Day, a time when we were challenged to pursue peace and justice around racism and gun violence, immigration and rural migrant workers, Israel/Palestine and criminal justice. And on the wall in the sanctuary of the Brentwood church, right at the front, are the words, "Love One Another." Perhaps we haven't taken that directive seriously enough, *personally* enough. What if loving one another meant making room, not just figuratively in a sentimental kind of way, but in a physical and life-changing kind of way—requiring not just our hearts but our hard work; the kind of exhausting, persistent, until-we-get-it-right work that went into digging those wells? Imagine if we reached out to our sisters and brothers of other denominations and other faiths on this World Communion Sunday, not just with our hearts but also with real intention to covenant. Imagine if we opened not just our hearts but also our neighborhoods to those who feel shut out. Imagine if it was not just our hearts but also our collectively marching feet that ached on behalf of victims of gun violence and of war. What can we do to make a broad place for others, so that they can be fruitful?

At the Open Door Exchange warehouse, where we house the furniture for our outreach ministry, we have a section for tables and chairs. And it seems that for those we serve—families with children, older adults, veterans—a table and chairs is one of the most needed items. It makes sense: without a table and chairs, you eat dinner on your lap, do homework on the floor, forego any opportunities for having family or a new friend over for a meal. I have become far more aware and appreciative in recent months of what a gift it is to see my kids sitting after school with their books and snacks spread out across our kitchen table.

The greatest need is for small tables, as most ODE guests are usually living in smaller apartments and homes. So when a donated dining table comes in, we usually take out the leaves and set up the table at its smallest size, enabling those who come to select items at the warehouse to envision how the table might fit in their kitchen or living area. It also helps us manage our own floor space at the warehouse.

If you come to the warehouse then, you'll see a bunch of tables with their extra leaves lying face down on top of them. A designer would surely tell us that it's not the most visually pleasing way to display what we have, but it occurs to me that perhaps it's an important reminder of the vision and the challenge God sets before us: to ever strive for a world in which our tables expand, in which we are called to add leaf after leaf after leaf until all are safely seated. There is no limit to the room that God makes for us at the divine table. No matter who we are, or where we are from, or the mistakes we have made, God says to us: come, I have prepared a place for you. Come and eat. It is an open, enduring, radical invitation to sit with Jesus at the table. There is always room.

And so it should be with the world we inhabit. No more wells of contention, or of enmity. Enough of violence and division, hostility and rejection. We dispense with borders and denominational lines, with our own fears about who might sit next to us, with our complacency about violence, and we make *this* year, *this* table, *this* day the starting point for a new commitment to peace. It starts here, at the table, with us. Each of us undeserving, and yet included, given room. We start from here and we move out into the world to serve Christ in our neighbor—the neighbor next to us in our pew, the neighbor in Wyandanch, the neighbor in Roseburg, the neighbor in Syria—tirelessly, until we've done our part to dig a well where *all* can experience here and now the fruitfulness that God offers.

Andrew King describes himself as a “customer service worker” for a fast food restaurant, and he writes beautiful poetry in his spare time. He titles this one “The Table with No Edges”:

#### **THE TABLE WITH NO EDGES**

We will sit down where feet tire from the journey.

We will sit down where grief bends the back.

We will sit down under roofs wrecked by artillery.

We will sit down where cries sound from cracked walls.

We will sit down where heat beats like hammers.

We will sit down where flesh shivers in cold.

We will sit down where bread bakes on thin charcoal.

We will sit down where there is no grain in baked fields.

We will sit down with those who dwell in ashes.

We will sit down in shadow and in light.

We will sit down, making friends out of strangers.

We will sit down, our cup filled with new wine.

We will sit down and let love flow like language.

We will sit down where speech needs no words.

We will sit together at the table with no edges.

We will sit to share one loaf, in Christ's name, in one world.<sup>1</sup>

O God, show mercy to us, and may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew King, “The Table With No Edges,” Poem for World Communion Sunday 2015 (September 27, 2015), <https://earth2earth.wordpress.com>.