



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

THE GREAT REMODEL PROJECT

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Federal Way, WA
July 29, 2007*

It's good to be back with you this morning. We had a terrific week of vacation, but we're glad to be home. As I've said before, some people go to Mexico or Europe, but the Peabody clan chooses to hang out with the mosquitoes in the far reaches of northern Minnesota for our summer destination. I can literally say we went all the way to Timbuktu, because there's this little spot on the lake called Timbuktu Marina. Taking a boat ride there to get ice cream is one of our favorite traditions when we go to Minnesota. All my best T-shirts say Timbuktu somewhere on them.

Do you have any of those favorite spots that you keep going back to? That restaurant you have to go to every time you're in town, or that great place to stay? If you're going to be on the road, it's nice to have something to look forward to that's familiar.

Elisha had a spot like that. As we've seen from this study of his life, he traveled quite a bit, and one of the most significant events in his life happened at his favorite little place in a town he visited called Shunem.

2 Kings 4:8-37

One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat.

She must have been a persuasive woman to convince Elisha to come to dinner. She must also have been a good cook, because one meal and he's hooked. He becomes a regular. Every time he's in town, he looks forward to going to her place to eat. He makes a point of always stopping in to visit when he's passing through.

This is a bit of a contrast with the woman from last week's story. The other was a widow – this one's happily married. One was poor – this one's wealthy. She has some influence. And she has plenty of food to feed Elisha. I think it's wonderful that these two stories are back to back because it shows how God's love reaches such diverse people. This woman's life situation is completely different from the widow's, and yet God was about to do something equally dramatic for her. There's no reverse discrimination with God – He cares about all of us, no matter what our status may be.

Elisha has captured her attention for some reason, and she gets a crazy idea in her head.

She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

It's one thing to invite a stranger over for dinner. You can entertain them for a couple hours, then go your separate ways. If you're really nice, you might even let them sleep on the couch for a night. But she's talking about something far more invasive and long term. She's talking about a house remodel. She wants to build a room for Elisha. Not a guest room for anybody's use -- it's a permanent space devoted to him.

When I went away to college, my room disappeared. You see in the movies where some parents preserve their kids rooms exactly the way they were when the kids were little. Not my mom. I came home and discovered she had redecorated it all with Scotty dogs. Scotty dog stuffed animals and a Scotty dog bedspread and Scotty dog pictures. Nothing against Scotty dogs, but it sure didn't feel like my room anymore. Because it WASN'T my room. I was now staying in a guest room. And it only got worse. After I graduated she turned it into a doll room. Maybe there was some subtle hinting that it was time for me to leave the nest.

Elisha's room would stay Elisha's room. It wouldn't become her craft corner or home office in between visits. It was dedicated exclusively to him. The woman in this story is treating Elijah like a permanent member of the family. It's a step deeper than polite dinner conversation. When he comes to see them, he won't just see the good china reserved for company. He'll see the dirty carpet upstairs. He'll hear the arguments. He'll know what happens in the house after the typical guests are gone. In creating a room that is all Elisha's, this woman has opened up a way for him to have a significantly different place in the family.

As a "holy man" in this story, the prophet Elisha represents God himself. He's a stand-in. The woman interacts with Elisha as if she's interacting with God himself. And that got me thinking about myself in comparison to her. How eager am I to build room into my life for God? We can think of it as treating God like company vs. treating him like family.

It's sometimes easier to think of God as a dinner guest. When I think of him as a guest in my life, it's when he's an occasional acquaintance, but not a major inconvenience. The relationship doesn't take much thought.

I got a call from a songwriter this week who had heard our winning song and was interested in collaborating. He knew I was a pastor, and in the course of the conversation he told me, "I'm a secular person. I'm not a Christian. But I write Christian songs, too." He wasn't opposed to God if God could help his career. That's treating God like a dinner guest. There's some friendly dialogue with no real relationship.

Do you have any memories of being a kid and trying to stay out of the way of your mom as she whipped around the house in a panic trying to clean up and get ready to make a

good impression on someone who was coming over for dinner? There's definitely a different dynamic when you're dealing with company than when you're dealing with family. A few weeks ago, we were having people over and Karin gave strict orders to the kids: "Under no circumstances are you to let them use your bathroom upstairs." She hadn't had time to clean it and she didn't want guests seeing it. The kids could use it – they were family.

One of the things that identifies guests as guests is that they have limited access. You don't let them go poking around just anywhere.

Another thing that you know about company is that after a while, they're going to leave. There's a polite amount of time to stay when you're invited over to dinner. Some people have a keener sense of that than others, but in the end, everyone still knows they have to go home eventually. Nobody's moving in.

And when everybody's finally gone home, you give a little sigh of relief and feel like you can relax. You tend to be on your best behavior when company's over, like you're putting on a mini-performance, and that gets taxing after a while. Family sees you like you really are. You're most at ease when the visitors are gone.

I think that gives us three good indicators as to whether I'm treating God like company or like family. How much access am I giving God? Are there a few doors in my heart that are shut off when he's around, or does he have full access?

Secondly, how much time am I giving God? Do I act like he's in my life for a dinner party with a very limited window, or am I incorporating him into my ongoing, day to day existence?

And finally, how at ease am I around God? I don't mean being all chummy and forgetting that he's God. But if I feel uncomfortable talking to him or about him, if I get tense and uptight instead of feeling relaxed and at home with him, I'm probably thinking of him more like company than like family.

I want to think of God as family, and that's going to mean building space for him in my life. But what does that mean?

The other day I spoke with somebody who was facing some financial decisions, and they realized they hadn't made much room for God in their budget. They had the chance to spend some money on themselves and they opted not to, in part to free up space in their budget to give more away. That was a costly decision, because it meant going without. And it was HARD. But they knew it was the right thing. That's what making room for God looks like.

Sometimes it's our money, sometimes it's our time, sometimes it's our attention. As I see it, there are two basic ways we can make room for God: We can **clean it** or we can **claim it**.

One of my goals for this month is to be able to park our van on the other side of our garage. That won't be enough of an improvement to get my car in the garage, but it will let me at least park on the other side of the driveway so it's easier for people to get to our front door.

For that to happen, though, I have to clean out a bunch of junk. The stuff that's in that space now has to go. Some of it can be reorganized, but a lot of it just needs to go to the dump. There's no point in hanging on to it. My problem is making it a priority to make the time to make the space.

We all have junk in our lives that is taking up space. We've got to clean that out to make room for God. We know that. We just have to make it a priority to make the time to make the space. It has to become intentional. There's unnecessary clutter in our hearts that has been sitting there for so long we don't even recognize it as junk. But as we set a goal of making space for God, we can reevaluate what's currently occupying room in our lives that maybe shouldn't be taking up so much real estate.

You'll notice though that the woman in this story doesn't clean out an existing room in her house to give to Elisha. She makes some brand new space up on the roof. Nothing was happening up there, so she claimed it for a new purpose.

For me, that was a bit of a revelation to consider, to look for unclaimed space in my life. What's my rooftop? Where are those corners of my world that aren't doing much of anything – good or bad? For example, I know two guys who have been best friends with since high school (they're now both in their 30s). Both of them are Christians. But they realized that they hadn't done anything to really build each other up spiritually. Their friendship hadn't done much to help them grow. So they made a conscious decision to change the dynamics of their relationship and make it more intentionally centered on Christ. They began to pray together and give each other permission to ask tough questions.

Maybe you have a relationship like that that you can claim for God. Maybe your roof top is something else, like your down time. Maybe it's some gift or talent you have that's been gathering dust and God wants to grab ahold of it, to move in and make it something new.

Whether we make space by cleaning or by claiming, the question is very simple: Are we going to treat God like a visitor, someone we talk to occasionally, or are we ready to start treating him like family and let him behind the scenes in our lives on a more permanent basis?

Elisha was very grateful that the woman would make such a sacrifice, and his new room became his home away from home.

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'"

She replied, "I have a home among my own people."

Again, this is a switch from the story last week. Instead of someone coming to Elisha asking for help, he's the one doing the asking, looking for a way to help. But this woman doesn't seem to have any needs. She's wealthy. She likes her home and doesn't want Elisha to put in any good word for her with the king. She's a woman who seems to have everything.

I used to have a client like that. Do you know how hard it is to buy a birthday gift for a multi-multimillionaire? What do you give to somebody who can get whatever they want without your help? Elisha's a bit stymied. What would be the right gift for her? The woman leaves and he turns to his assistant for help.

"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked.

Gehazi said, "Well, she has no son and her husband is old."

Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."

"No, my lord," she objected. "Don't mislead your servant, O man of God!"

Elisha has found the one thing missing from this lady's life. It's a desire so deep but so impossible that she has buried it completely. She had worked hard to be content with where she was at in life. She's worked through it and isn't asking any more. But the ache is still there. It would be cruel of Elisha to even hint that direction if he wasn't serious. But he was totally serious, and God took his request seriously.

But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

There are several stories in the Bible about women who were unable to have children, who miraculously became pregnant. Sarah finally had Isaac. Rebekah finally had Jacob. Rachel finally had Joseph. Hannah finally had Sampson. In all those cases, the child born had an extremely significant role in Israel. The miraculous births happened in part because God had big plans for the children.

Then we have this nameless Shunammite. We have no idea what her child grew up to do. God doesn't seem to answer Elisha's prayer for any reason other than to do something nice for this woman. There aren't any agendas or strings attached to the gift.

Jesus said that God likes to give good gifts to his children. Sometimes in the back of our minds we can't quite believe that God would do anything for us unless he wants something in return. I like it that this story shows us a God who gives good gifts for no reason other than because he wants to.

The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. "My head! My head!" he said to his father.

His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return."

"Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath."

"It's all right," she said.

She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you." So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, "Look! There's the Shunammite! Run to meet her and ask her, 'Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?'"

"Everything is all right," she said.

When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why."

"Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'"

Before Elisha had come along, the woman had been very happy with her life. She had no complaints. She had a good thing going. Then Elisha gives her this incredible gift of a son, who was a source of joy like she had never known. But now she knows a kind of pain she had never experienced. The good gift turns out to be a source of unbearable grief. Why did things turn the way they did? This woman had done nothing to incur God's wrath. What could possibly be the point of all this suffering?

Elisha didn't know the answer. He commented that God had hidden the reason from him. I love his honesty. Sometimes we're uncomfortable with God's silence and we rush to find answers that aren't really from him. It's okay to say we don't know the whys.

Even with thousands of years of perspective on this story, I don't know that we can speak with total certainty as to why God let that boy die. But I think one reason can be found in the woman herself.

You can see such a change in her from the first verse where we met her. There she was confident, well-resourced and self-contained. She wanted nothing from Elisha. She saw herself as more of a giver than a receiver. It was all about what she could do for him.

Now she's clinging to his feet, begging for help. The woman who had everything now finds herself in the same place as the woman who had nothing, pleading for mercy. I think we could say that the real gift Elisha gave her turned out to be the gift of neediness. She is now in a place of dependence on God.

While we were up at the cabin, we watched the old movie, "I Remember Mama," about this big Scandinavian family and the larger than life mother who held them all together. At one point in the movie, one of the girls became extremely ill, and the doctors wouldn't even let mama in to see her. This strong woman was powerless to do anything for her child. So she went home and immediately got down and started scrubbing the floor. Her other kids were disturbed by this obsessive behavior, and they said, "Mama, get up!" And she responded, "Sometimes, you just have to get on your knees."

John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, once said, "Experience testifies that a long course of ease and prosperity, without painful changes, has an unhappy tendency to make us cold and formal in our secret worship; but troubles rouse our spirits, and constrain us to call upon the Lord in good earnest, when we feel a need of that help which we only can have from him."

We may never know why this boy got sick, or why we lose a job or why someone we love abandons us or why our world falls apart. God is often silent as to the whys. But he is clearly capable of using those difficult circumstances to change us and draw us to himself. Neediness can be a gift in disguise.

Pete Greig started a major worldwide prayer movement and has seen countless miracles and answers to prayer through his ministry. After years of successful ministry, his wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor the size of an orange. It turned out to be operable, but removing it left her with permanent epilepsy. All the expertise on prayer has not translated into a miracle cure for her, forcing Pete to wrestle with God's purposes in suffering. In his book "God on Mute," he writes,

I have come to believe that if Samie had been spared her brain tumor and we'd never been forced to face the possibility of her early death, we would thereby have missed out on God's best for our lives. God's best has somehow been drawn from the worst pain we could ever have imagined. I continue to hate Samie's illness, but I love Samie more because of it. God has shown himself to be bigger than that fierce tumor. Bigger than a misfiring brain, too. Bigger than nights of fear, Bigger than my inability to comprehend.

God is bigger than our inability to comprehend. Your neediness and my neediness is only a gift if it causes us to realize God's bigness and ability to meet that need. It is only a gift if it brings us in touch with God's power. It's only a gift if it causes us to trust God's goodness.

Elisha responds immediately

Elisha said to Gehazi, "Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face."

But the child's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So he got up and followed her.

Did you catch that? The woman uses Elisha's own words that he had used to Elijah. She is determined to stay by his side.

Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened."

While the woman is pursuing Elisha, Elisha is doing his own pursuing. He is attempting to discern what method God will use to raise up this boy. He thought maybe Gehazi could handle it with his staff, but that turned out to be a bust.

You kind of scratch your head wondering why that happened at all. But to me it shows a certain freedom on Elisha's part to act even before he has real clarity from God. Sometimes I can get paralyzed when I'm praying for answers, to the point where I don't try anything because I want absolute clarity first. It's okay to continue moving forward as we pray. If something we try fails, it simply becomes another step in the process of moving toward God's will.

Touching a stick to the boy's face isn't going to be enough. This is a serious problem that will need to be addressed directly by Elisha himself.

When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch.

There's nothing subtle about the context here. The woman had made a space for Elisha. Elisha had given her a gift. Now the woman took the gift directly back to Elisha's space, making a deliberate statement. She doesn't put the boy in his own bed – she lays him down on Elisha's. It is the right place to bring this need, because it is the place in the house that speaks to relationship and history and connection.

I like the visual of taking our griefs before God and leaving them in his room. We let it be his problem, and we trust the relationship and history and connection. We trust what we know of him from the past to meet our present need.

He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

It's an odd picture to our 21st century imaginations. I've taken CPR classes, and I think it's safe to say no paramedic would approve of this resuscitation technique. It seems like the boy would more likely be crushed or suffocated than revived. Of course, that's operating under the assumption that the boy was still alive. But he can't get any more dead. Any way of bringing him back would have to be radical.

Think of this from Elisha's perspective. Dead bodies were considered extremely unclean and unfit for touching. Over and over again, Elisha has been referred to as this holy man of God – the last person who should come in contact with a corpse. He not only comes in contact with it, he identifies completely with the dead body. He presses his face right down into that boy's face, eyeball to eyeball, lips touching lips. He places his arms and hands up against the cold little arms and hands beneath him. He covers him completely.

As he does that, as he takes on the posture of death, life transfers to the little boy. Gradually warmth returns, then air, then even a sneezing fit. He is fully alive after being completely dead. Elisha's unorthodox method proved to be the right one.

What a beautiful picture of Christ, who didn't flinch from coming into contact with us. He was the last person who should have anything to do with us, but he pressed himself into our world completely and took on the posture of death. And as he covered us, he revived us, giving us a new chance for life.

Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

Once again, Elisha gives the woman the gift of a son. It's the same son, but a different mother. She has now faced her darkest fears and seen them come true. She has experienced true neediness and desperation for perhaps the first time in her life. She has leaned on God more heavily and intensely than ever. And God has proven to be faithful.

What started out as a remodel of her house ended up being a remodel of herself. She thought she was just expanding her house, but God was in the process of expanding her heart.

What remodeling would he like to do in you this morning? God may have something in mind for you to do that will in turn translate into something deeper that he does inside you. I want to think about that for myself in terms of two questions. First,

What's my rooftop? What's that corner of my heart and mind that could be given over to God? Maybe I need to do some cleaning out first or maybe I just need to claim it and make it intentionally his. What is that place for you this morning?

Secondly, what can I bring to God's room? What grief do I need to leave with God, some disappointment, burden or hurt that I can't bear anymore? What can I lay before him today?

There's an old song that says, "All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife, but he made something beautiful out of my life."

Jesus has already shown that he's not afraid to come in contact with our sorrow. He can help us find a gift in our neediness when we bring it to him.