

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Hello Artisan podcast listeners. Pastor Scott Austin here, thanks so much for listening. As you've probably heard our church has just launched a fundraising campaign to renovate and expand our children's ministry space and to make our building more accessible and inclusive. It's called Growing in Faith Together.

So if this podcast has been meaningful for you whether or not you are able to attend Artisan person, I want to invite you to be part of this campaign too. You can visit ArtisanGrowing.com to find out more, to make a one time donation, or maybe even pledge a recurring gift. Thanks again for listening and for supporting Artisan Church enjoy the podcast.

[Pastor Scott's voice giving the sermon in church] So I'd like to begin this morning with, with a thank you. With a word of thanks to all of you who have been around here for the past few weeks and for the way that you have responded to this Growing in Faith Together series which is after all also a capital campaign. Which can be, you know, challenging for churches and, and so forth.

I have promised all along not to, not to turn sermons into PBS pledge drives, as I've said, and I hope that that has been the case for the most part.

But I'm grateful to you for the response that you've given to the ideas and to the way that it's been presented it's really been encouraging. So thank you for sticking with this and if you're visiting with us today I am sorry.

[laughter]

I mean not really because again hopefully we're doing this in a way that feels comfortable and doesn't violate the purpose of coming to church to worship God and to hear the word proclaim and to have the sacraments administered and all those good things, but this may be you know it wouldn't be your first choice of where to drop into our life together so if you're visiting with us hang tight we got a couple more weeks of this and I hope that this is a blessing to you in some way even today but, you know, I recognize that it may not be the most comfortable way to start your life with a new church, so we're glad you're here.

So here's where we've been: we started out a few weeks ago just giving an overview of the Growing in Faith Together campaign, identifying some of the challenges that we're faced with in our building, and in what's happening in the growth and life of our church. And then in the second week we talked about generational faith and how the faith is handed down from one generation to the next and we thought about how we received faith from those who came

before us and we pass it on to those who come after us, and all that has to happen in a in a place here that needs to facilitate that, and then last week we had the beautiful chaos - not all chaos is great in church - but a little bit of chaos once in a while is okay and we had a lot of the good kind I think last week. We talked about acorns and how our smallest Artisans, the acorns if you will, are such beautiful parts of our community, that we love them and embrace them and want to you know help them experience God not because they'll become oak trees someday but because acorns are miracles in their own right and we had a great time with the kids and they led the way in so many parts of our service last week and we all made this beautiful piece of art together with the leaves in the sharpies and you can please check that out if you haven't seen it yet. Put it on Instagram #artisangrowing and so forth.

[laughter]

So we've been talking a lot about the children and our children's ministry space and I know that many of you in the room, you don't have children or maybe you had children and they're grown and gone away. It's not that you don't care about children you want to support the children of Artisan but you're thinking to yourself "you know I'm really passionate about some other things. When is Pastor Scott going to give a sermon that makes me want to give lots of money to the Growing in Faith Together campaign?" and I'm happy to tell you that that day is here.

[laughter]

So today we're talking about accessibility and inclusion and the sermon is entitled "Invitations" which will become clear in a little bit.

I chose as my text today a story from Luke Chapter 5 verses 17-26. If you are a visual person and want to follow along in a Bible you can use the red Bibles and turn to page 836 and 837. If you brought your own of course you can look it up and find it, or you can just listen to the story that's fine if you prefer. This is a very famous, very popular story from the New Testament. A story of healing Jesus performs. Many of you've heard this story, many of you have heard the story more than once.

And so I chose this story on this day, with this topic, for two reasons, one of which is probably obvious and one that is not as obvious. So here's what I'm going to ask you to do: while I read the story see if you can figure out what are the two reasons that Scott chose this story today on this topic of accessibility and inclusion and invitation and we'll see if you can guess both reasons. Okay?

So this is Luke 5:17-26.

"One day while he was teaching Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby. They had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith he said "friend your sins are forgiven

you.” Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question “who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” When Jesus perceived their questionings he answered them “why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier to say ‘your sins are forgiven you’ or to say ‘stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” he said to the one who is paralyzed “I say to you stand up and take your bed and go to your home.” Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on and went to his home glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them and they glorified God and were filled with awe saying “we have seen strange things today.”

So let me tell you the first reason why I chose this story today.

Here's an example of a person with a disability who can't get close to Jesus. Right, now let me pause just for a second in this explanation of the first reason to talk about language a little bit. There is something of a debate within the Disability Community about whether you should use person first language, in other words what I just said “a person with a disability” or “people with disabilities” or on the other hand, whether you should use identity first language which would be “disabled person” or “disabled people” and there are passionate arguments on both sides of that for, within the Disability Community. Not being a member of that community I sort of try to defer to whoever I'm talking with at the time. Given that we're in a mixed audience here, there might be some people in the room who prefer one over the other, so I'm going to alternate between the two. Fair enough? By the way, it's an interesting conversation for why somebody might prefer one or the other of those things which actually could inform how we think about accessibility in the church, but for now we're going to leave that to the side and you can go look into that yourself if you're interested, but here's an example of a person with a disability who can't get close to Jesus because the building is too crowded and because he can't get through the front door.

Is this a little too on the nose for us this morning?

[laughter]

We have a building that's very crowded, particularly the Children's Ministry space but we're actually getting to the point of crowding in this room as well especially when they're all with us and a person with a wheelchair probably couldn't open our front doors if they weren't already propped open.

So I could preach the whole sermon from that angle just from that first reason for choosing this text.

And it would it would lead me to the place of making a big plea for you all to give generously to the Growing in Faith Together campaign so that disabled people can get to Jesus without cutting a hole in our roof, which after all was just put on this building less than five or six years ago. And that might actually work as a sermon. And up until a couple of years ago that's probably the way I would have preached the sermon. I might have done just exactly what I described.

But I can't give that sermon in that way today because of some of the things that I have learned in recent years about people disabilities and their experiences. And so that leads me to the second reason for choosing the story today.

How many of you guessed the first reason why I chose this story? Really, really easy right? Here's the second reason I wonder if anybody guessed this: that I chose this story is that this story, with a little bit of explanation, can show us how little we know and how poorly we understand our friends in the Disability Community.

Let me tell you something that you might not know, that happens to many disabled people the first time they visit a church. I'm talking the first time they go to a church, never met anybody there. This bunch of well-intentioned Christian strangers gathers around them and places their hands on their body and prays for them to be healed of their disability.

Now in addition to being what should I hope - I wish were a more obvious violation of personal space, this is also a spiritual violation. Let me tell you why. Almost never does anybody stop and ask the person with a disability if they want to be healed of it. Before praying that they would be. And for many disabled persons, their disability is not something that they want to get rid of, it's something that they see as part of who they are. It's a point of pride for them.

Let me give you an analogy imagine if – this is just off the top of my head here – imagine if a very tall man went to visit a church full of rather short people and all the short people looked up at him when he came in and they said “We're going to pray for you brother” and they all put their hands on the man and prayed for him to be healed of his affliction of tallness.

The man might be like “What are you doing? I rather like being tall. I can take my kids Halloween candy and put it up on a very high shelf. They can never find it. I can eat it and at any time!” Again this is just off the top of my head. I know this is just a, just an example.

[laughter]

What happens to people disabilities in churches is like that but not funny.

You imagine this could also happen to left handed people. Or gay or non-binary people. Or people who are balding. Or young people or old people or anybody who has kind of, any kind of difference from the, from the majority in the room. Being prayed for to have that difference removed.

It's embarrassing. It's insulting. And perhaps worst of all, it demonstrates an inability or maybe an unwillingness on the part of people of faith to stop and listen to what's actually going on in the heart and in the mind of the person right in front of them who was created in God's image.

So back to this second reason for choosing this story.

See, when disabled people have spent their whole lives with this experience of unwanted prayers for unwanted healing, they begin to read stories of healing in the Bible a little differently than how you might or I might read them.

Some people with disabilities read this story from Luke Chapter five and the first thing they think isn't "Wow what a beautiful miraculous story, plus sticking it to the Pharisees, and friendship thrown in! Go God!"

But actually, instead their response is, "Did this man's friends even ask him if he wanted to go see Jesus? If he wanted to be lowered down through a roof into a room of people he didn't know and be made a spectacle of? If he even wanted to be healed in the first place?"

Now let me encourage you, before you start to argue, before you jump to the defense of the story as it's told, in the way it's interpreted, before you start to point out things like "Of course he wanted to be healed he went away praising God" and all of those things. Let me just, let me just ask you to turn that part of your brain off for a second and instead ask some questions.

What does this way of reading this story have to teach us about different people's experience of being in church? Or of different people's experience of reading the Bible? Or of receiving the sacraments? Or of God?

Ask yourself what could we learn from the different perspectives that might be present, even when they are challenging our normal understanding of things, that we couldn't learn if they weren't there?

And then think about the fact, that the only reason in this case that I'm able to present to you that way of reading this text is that we have made friends with actual people with disabilities have been part of our community over the past couple of years and with some who are outside of our community but still have a kind of an alleyway by which they can speak into our life as a church. Without those relationships we would never have had the opportunity to learn those things. I certainly would not have been able to tell you that that perspective existed.

And then start to think about how much we might have to learn from other people, people we don't know yet, people who don't have a voice in our congregation, people whose perspectives we have not heard because it hasn't been possible for them to be here with us. People who are essentially nonexistent to us as a result of some barriers that are present at our church.

We have a new video to show you this morning. Very proud of it. We just wrapped it up at I think it was 1:59am the link came through. I'm eager to show it to you.

And I will say that we have it captioned and subtitled, but there's a couple of typos there. We will fix those, we know that they're there but at 1:59 in the morning you print it and go.

So here's what I want you to think about as I show you this video. As you watch it, I want you to think about one last thing, I want you to think about the why. Okay? I want you to think about why we at Artisan Church are concerned with accessibility and inclusion. Is it so we can pat ourselves on the back? Or put a badge on our website that shows how woke we are? Is it so we can be proud of how, like, we the really important people care so much about the less fortunate and less important people? Is there any bit of that attitude kind of floating around with this movement toward accessibility and inclusion? Is it so that we have a feather in our cap? Or is it

because we recognize that we are actually impoverished as a community when entire groups of people are not present with us

Ask yourselves those questions. Would you please dim the lights and roll that video for us.

[Video rolling]

[Male voice] I think one of the biggest things that I've learned over my time at Artisan is that God's word isn't good news for anybody it's not good news for everybody. We've been working on racial reconciliation. We've been working to be more inclusive of people of disabilities, and people who are LGBTQ. I'm sure that we'll discover there are many other ways that we need to open our doors wider, but, really, God's people encompasses everybody. God wants to reach the whole world and if we're just looking for people who look like us or act like us or talk like us then we're putting a limit on who God wants to reach.

[Female voice] So I've seen a lot of big changes and little changes. One of my favorites is the ramp. When I first started at Artisan there was this big push for the aesthetics and beauty and I was worried that a ramp would be viewed as unbeautiful. And I was really excited when we were able to make a ramp that is so beautiful and aesthetically pleasing and fits both in the ideology of Artisan, but also with accessibility and the ideology of accessibility and everybody being welcome here. The cloth on the table was there for aesthetic purposes but it's something that wheelchair users get their wheels stuck in a lot and so every time I would go to take communion I would wonder if I'm about to burn the place down. I think this table is absolutely gorgeous and we found a way to, again, keep it beautiful and accessible for everybody.

[Male voice] When I think about Artisan's mission to encounter God and embrace people and engage culture in the way of Jesus, and when you look at Jesus's ministry and how he reached out to those who have been marginalized in society, it's clear that we're called to do the same thing. We need to be looking for the people who have been left behind and bring them in and giving them a space at the table alongside everyone else.

[Female voice] I don't think people recognize just how hard it is to navigate backing up into one door while trying to open another door and creating enough space between the two, so it would be really great to have doors that have automatic openers. I don't think that I would be the only one utilizing them. People with disabilities would love them, but so would children. Kids love buttons. And I think parents who have strollers or their hands full, or, honestly, anyone who's bringing anything for the pot luck, is really gonna appreciate some automatic doors. Accessibility is for everyone.

[Male Voice] I think we need to do everything in our power to make sure that people are feeling comfortable and welcome and able to connect with God in the best way that they can.

[Music]

[Video ends]

[Pastor Scott] So you saw that URL at the end ArtisanGrowing.com. If you're listening to this on the podcast you can visit that URL for the details and to watch that video if you would like to see it instead of just hearing it in your headphones.

So we've learned a lot here at Artisan about how to be welcoming to people with disabilities in the past couple of years. As Stephanie pointed out in the video, we have a couple of significant things that we still need to do and these are the big ticket items if you will. We've kind of gathered all the low hanging fruit for how to make our building a lot more accessible we have a couple of pretty big dollar items that still need to be done.

The first one is those entry doors with the buttons we all love buttons, not just kids, everybody loves buttons.

[Laughter]

If you've ever done any kind of home renovation and gotten a fancy door to put into your house you know how expensive a door can be. Now imagine there's two of them and maybe four if you have an entry kind of a foyer space there in between. And now imagine that you also need to put motors on them so that they can open and they have to run electricity to that and all of the different contractors and everybody who's done this before, like the dollar signs are just rolling in your head. Right? This gets to be fairly expensive.

And then the other thing that we have to do, the other big ticket item, is we have to completely renovate our bathrooms and read redo them basically from the ground up. There are thirty years old and failing anyway. But they're also not very useful or accessible to many people with disabilities. For people who have wheelchairs or who need aid with using the bathroom, there's just not enough space in those stalls.

And we've been talking almost exclusively this morning about how our building can be welcoming to disabled people, but in the case of the bathrooms these same improvements also make our building welcoming for lots of other people including transgender or non-binary people, or anybody who for whatever reason is not entirely comfortable in a traditional stalled, gendered bathroom situation in a public place.

Now anybody who's ever renovated a bathroom knows that the same problem arises. You pull out those old fixtures, you start putting in the new ones and you think "well, I can get this one its four dollars but it's really hideous and the next one up is one hundred ninety two dollars."

[laughter]

So that's the way it works in bathroom renovations and if you have to move them from one space in the building to another and it's also very expensive.

So yes, replacing those doors, replacing those bathrooms. Those are big ticket items. They're expensive, but I would like us to think about this a little bit differently. Instead of thinking about how expensive that project is or the whole project is, because this actually applies in either case, what if we thought instead about how costly it would be not to do that work?

To help you get your mind around that let me give you another little analogy. We're going to take communion together in just a minute. We come around the big, we call the big like banquet table of Jesus sometimes, right? Like a fancy dinner party where Grace is on the menu and you're all invited.

But imagine if you received an invitation to an actual dinner party, like a fancy one that had those expensive scripts fonts on the front. And you are so excited to go to this. You can tell it's going to be a nice dinner. It's going to be some special people there and you get there you've taken your nicest bottle of wine out of your collection or gone to the store and ask somebody what's the right one for this special party. You're all excited to get there you get to the place where the dinner is to be held and you hear the sounds of joy and excitement inside and you think "I'm just about to be there" and you get inside and you see where the food is laid out on this dining room table that seats exactly four people.

And you're the fifth person to walk into the room. And you think, "Uh, do I have the wrong date? Is the wrong place? Is this the wrong party?" They say "no, no, no! We want you to be here! We're glad you're here. That looks like a nice bottle of wine, we'll just put that over here. So glad you came to dinner."

And you think "I can't really sit down" and they're like "No, it's not a problem! We're glad you're here! All are welcome!"

But it doesn't take very long, does it, before you realize this is not actually a genuine invitation to something because I can't access it when I get here.

That is what church is like for some people. I know it's not what church is like for most of you, so I'm asking you to practice some empathy and imagine that that might be true. That you come to church and it seems like welcoming in lots of ways and then maybe you spent some time there even then eventually you had these barriers that they didn't tell you were going to be there. You find that, no, actually, you can't do this. You can't go to that space. You can't be part of this ministry team.

And we talk about all the time how this building is not the church. We are the church, right? You've heard me say that before? It goes all the way back to one of our founding pastors, Brian Haak, who used to say that when he would do that the dismissal. He would say that every week, "This is a building, you are the church. Now go be the church." I say some version of that even now today.

And yet we do meet in a building that's called the church building, so we have to think both ways about this. Here's the problem if our building does not reflect and express the same values that we, the body of Christ, have in our hearts and minds then that's a problem that has to be addressed.

And there's this beautiful moment in the New Testament in the book of Acts where the Apostle Peter has had this crazy dream and like wild course of events it's in Acts chapter ten, you can read about it, but what he comes to say in all of it is this, "I truly understand that God shows no

partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. Jesus Christ is Lord of all.”

We want to say that with our lips, we want to mean it in our hearts, and we want our building to communicate it as well.

So, I'm going to get to the communion table in about ninety seconds but I want to do one short thing first. I want to invite you to something fancy. If you have not already RSVP'd for one of our candle light receptions, we have two of these one of them is tonight at six and one of them is Wednesday at seven. I know we set the deadline for RSVP as yesterday but I'm going to extend that to you just today, if you haven't RSVP'd yet, we'd love to have you come to one of these. They will be kind of fancy. There will be enough food and wine and places to be to go around.

We have lots of stuff planned. All the food is being made by Artisans in-house. Sometimes being made by some of our youth who can out-bake anybody in this room, I promise. So don't miss out on that. And then the other thing that's going to happen at these is you're going to find out how you could go about getting one of these wonderful Artisan Church t-shirts that you saw our band wearing today. If you have been thinking this whole morning “Oh, those look sharp, I wish I could have one” We're going to find out how to get one or if you've noticed me drinking water from this beautiful artisan church pint glass, which has a nice echo, we'll tell you tonight. Or maybe if you're more of a note taking nerdy sort, we have these beautiful Artisan notebooks. They're not Field Notes branded but they are very much like field notes if you know what I'm talking about. Dot grids on the inside, beautiful letterpress design. Maybe you want of those or maybe you've been eyeing this attractive amber bottle the whole morning. It's been sitting on the stool, it has our logo on it as well. Alright, we have swag is what I'm saying to you.

[laughter]

And if you want to find out how to get some of that swag, you got to come to one of these receptions, so please do RSVP. ArtisanChurch.com/RSVP and we have childcare provided, just let us know what you need and all that kind of stuff.

So, I want invite you now to come to the table of the Lord.

And when you come this time I want you to notice that it's a fairly small table. It's designed to serve everybody in the room but let's leave that aside for a second. Let's imagine that this is that table that people have been invited to and that when they get there, every seat is already taken. I want you to imagine whether or not that might be true at Artisan in some ways and what we might be able to do about it and what you might be able to do about it.

If you prefer not to take Communion this morning that's OK. It's an open table but sometimes people are not believers and they don't want to be participating in that part, that's OK. You can sit and think or meditate. We have a member of the prayer team at the back of the room who would be happy to pray with anyone who needs prayer, and our kids are welcome to take communion. If you want to go get them before you can or right after would be wonderful.

So our band will come up, we're going to sing a couple more songs as we take communion, but come to the table notice that it is small and think about how we can be more accessible, more inclusive, and more invitational at Artisan Church. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com