

A Church for the Left Out

Sunday, May 7, 2017

Matthew 14:13-21

Open with story of feeling left out -- serving as team manager (glorified water girl) in high school volleyball -- I wanted to play so badly -- I sat on the sidelines and served my team when I really wanted to be on the court. The buzzer rang and they got to play and I sat the bench.

What about you? Think of a time you felt left out. Everyone else seemed to be having all the fun and you weren't included. Maybe it was on accident. Maybe it was by your choice. Or maybe, someone intentionally left you out. You were excluded, forgotten, dismissed. It can feel pretty awful.

Since I was young, I've been determined to make sure no one feels left out, especially in the church. I was the high school kid inviting everyone to youth group, especially the people others didn't want to hang out with. If I knew we were having a party at someone's house, I made sure everyone got invited. Something inside of me knew this was kind of the whole point of being the church -- that everyone is in. Grace and love are for all people. **Love doesn't leave people out.**

Today we're celebrating the kind of community we're creating in this place. Two years ago you decided to become a reconciling community in the United Methodist Church. This means you chose to be intentional about welcoming all people. It wasn't an idea or a far off concept, you decided to do it. The process to get to that decision wasn't easy. But you realized this was the call of Christ: to welcome all people into the kingdom of God.

And it's been my privilege to have a front row seat to all that's happening because of your decision two years ago. I've now spent time with 75 different people at our membership gatherings in the last 22 months and about 90% of them have said the full acceptance and welcome they've found here is why they want to be a part of this church.

The ways you said yes two years ago will continue to leave a legacy for years to come as we live into this calling.

Today, we're going to look at a Jesus story on making room, scarcity and Jesus' answer for just about everything. We'll talk about the holy ground here and what it means to be a church for the left out and excluded.

There was a moment in Jesus' life where he'd just learned that his cousin, John the Baptist, had just died. Jesus wanted to spend some time by himself. But the crowds followed and he had compassion for them. An interesting exchange happens followed by one of Jesus' famous miracle stories.

Jesus tells his students: "Give the crowd something to eat."
They respond: "This is all we have. We don't have enough."
Jesus: "**Bring them to me.**"

A couple fascinating things about this conversation.

The disciples are right to notice the limitations. We're the same way. God invites us to do incredible things with our lives and we don't feel equipped. It would be natural and wise to send the crowds to people who can best help them. To the grocery stand! The coffee shop! They have what you need. But notice Jesus says, "you give them something to eat."

The church isn't asked to fulfill every need. We're not asked to figure out how a few loaves and fishes are going to feed everyone. We are to bring what we have to Jesus and share it. The miracle isn't that **we figured something out**. The **miracle is that we give what we have and God makes it enough**.

We don't get to pretend that what we have to share with the world is really that amazing. We simply share what we've been given and trust that it's enough. We share it freely, wildly, irrationally with others, expecting that God can take our limited, feeble resources and make of them a feast to serve our community (Feasting on the Word).

This truth stopped me dead in my tracks this week. Maybe you're a bit like me. You like to figure things out. Numbers on a spreadsheet, a situation at work that could be more efficient, the easiest way to get your children to bed at night so you can sink into the couch for the best moment of your day. It feels good to figure something out.

But we come up short with God when we overestimate our ability to figure something out and underestimate God's desire to bless what we already have. So for whatever situations you're going through now, hear this: **The miracle isn't that you're figuring something out. The miracle is that you trust God with what you already have and God does something miraculous with it!**

Back to this interesting conversation...

So Jesus tells us: "Give the crowd something to eat." -- **We get to feed people! We get to make room for people!**

But we often respond: "This is all we have. We don't have enough." **The voices of scarcity are loud. They rise up within us, especially in a culture of consumerism. We're told so often that we start to believe we don't have enough food, clothes, toys, money, time, patience, forgiveness, love.**

Jesus: "Bring them to me." **So as a church, we arrange ourselves so we can bring people to Jesus in a gracious way that honors each person. We don't force, we don't manipulate, we don't use guilt. We gently point towards the One who is making us new.**

And when a church does this, we become holy ground. So today, let us celebrate anew the ways you are offering our community holy ground.

I invite you to stand for a moment as we reaffirm this community today. Let us proclaim this loud and proud, with conviction and great hope!

Read statement together out loud:

Marysville United Methodist Church believes that having "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" means we are called to share God's welcome with all people. We embrace diversity and believe every person is of sacred worth and a beloved child of God.

We commit ourselves to the hospitality Jesus taught, by creating a place of safety and spiritual sanctuary for all people. We welcome into full participation in the life of this church people of every race, ethnicity, age, ability, physical or mental condition, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, gender identity, sexual orientation, and family structure. We invite all people into the way of Jesus Christ, to grow together in Christian maturity, and go forth into the world to serve.

A church for the left out

Friends, it's one thing to stand up each year and say some words. It's quite another for this vision to become a reality in our midst. We long to be this kind of community for those who have felt left out in our world. Lately I've been wondering **if God is calling us to be a church for the left out, the excluded, the dismissed.** This wouldn't be an easy calling. Because it will inconvenience us. Someone will use "your" parking spot. Someone will sit in "your" seat. Our worship times may change. People will show up who don't look like you. Or act like you. This dream we just said out loud? It will feel uncomfortable.

And it's at that exact moment, when we might be tempted to back away from the uncomfortable reality of this abundant vision, that we get quiet and listen to what God's spirit is doing in this place. We remember our purpose is more important than our preference. And we decide to share our seat, our food, our parking spot, our ministry, our familiar ways of being church so that someone else doesn't feel left out of the kingdom of God. That's the kind of church I want to be a part of!

As I sit back and reflect on these past two years or so, I see a thread running through many of the stories I've gotten to hear. There's hurt and pain from experiences in other faith communities. People have been left out, dismissed, pushed aside. Questions burning deep in their heart were quieted. They felt left out because of what their family looked like, who they loved, their gender, a special need, their age, their color or who they vote for.

It's bad enough to feel left out in our schools, our families, our places of employment or our neighborhoods. But to pick up a message that we aren't welcome in a church can cause trauma for years.

And here's what I sense in this place. People are healing from some of this trauma. The community that we are cultivating and protecting is holy ground for so many. This is a gift you give our world. Grace and love are for all people. Your questions are welcome. We could be a church for the left out, excluded and dismissed.

And the thing about being this kind of church? People want to be a part of it. Church, you are growing. New friends are coming and many of them are staying. They're sensing this community is real, imperfect and gracious. Which brings us to our conversation about worship that we'll have next Sunday at 1pm here in the sanctuary. All are invited as we have an important conversation about what it means that our 9:00 service is full most Sundays. We're so excited about our new friends who are feeling included and we want to listen deeply and discern where God is inviting us next. If we want to be a church for the left out, then what does that look like when it comes to how and when we gather to worship? This will be a wonderful conversation for our church to engage in together!

I'm also trying to remember the Jesus promise we mentioned earlier. The miracle doesn't come in us "figuring out" the best times and styles for worship in some perfect schedule so that everyone is happy and all our needs are met. The **miracle is that we give to God what we already have. Our gifts, our facility, who we are and we ask God to work a miracle in us and through us.**

There's one more nuance I must share this morning...

It's tempting even in this conversation of welcoming all people, to still focus on how *others are excluded*. Especially the elements in our inclusion statement. Which means we might be tempted to pat ourselves on the back and think, "Oh look how welcoming we are! We're so great! We're the right ones who are welcoming everybody!"

But here's the nuance that's hard to catch sometimes.

This is about you, too.

There are ways right now that you feel excluded from God's love. You carry around a laundry list of reasons why you're not worthy of love, grace and belonging. It's a well-rehearsed list. You've memorized it. I've memorized mine. And part of what we are doing is unlearning the list. You're replacing it with a new list. A new story. And this story tells you the truth about who you are. Because the new story is coming from the One who made you.

Jesus told his students when they were scared they didn't have enough, or didn't know how to welcome the people or what to do next, he said, "**Bring them to me.**"

Church, that's exactly what we're doing. We're making room for people in Marysville who feel left out, excluded, forgotten, to know Jesus, to heal in community and to draw the circle even wider.

That is a church I'm honored to be a part of! Amen!