

Sermon for July 25

Stepping Outside the Box

The scriptures this week point towards goals that a church should have if it seeks to be a member of the community. We have the story of Christ healing on the Sabbath, breaking societal norms so that he could continue ministry and help those in need. The Colossians reading points us towards a goal as a community, of being refreshed and of being one body of Christ. Isaiah gives us hope for a better tomorrow, something that any church can work with. Today, I choose to focus on the Gospel reading, as it offers up an image of what I pray is the community that we aim to be.

Yet to understand a viewpoint on the Gospel, I want to invite you to listen to stories of individuals that could represent the community that we wish to include in our church. These three individuals are indeed hypothetical, yet they represent people that I have worked with when I worked in a social service agency in Denver. The agency was Metro CareRing which provided food and services to those who needed it. It was set up by down town churches to meet the needs of those in the Denver community. It is a great ministry that many people in Denver have committed to.

During that time working for Metro CareRing I spent time with many individuals who felt that the church had abandoned them, or that they felt that they could not be a part of a congregation. Yet they asked me many questions about my faith, and they appeared to have a genuine interest in the church. It saddened me that they felt that they were outcasts. However, I have the hope that there are communities out there that will welcome them and so they can have a relationship with Christ and a community. Listen to these stories with an open mind, and think about how they could be incorporated into our community of believers.

Keisha is a 23 year-old single mother of two beautiful children, ages 5 and 3. She comes to Metro CareRing to receive some food, so that she can provide nourishment to her family. She also receives bus tokens so she can make it through the month with enough money for her children. She feels that she is alone and must keep pushing forward to be the mom that she wants to be.

She is a discouraged individual, because she is working 50 hours a week at her job, yet she feels that she is getting nowhere. She knows that she needs to find a higher paying job, but she does not have the ability to receive additional schooling at this time, as she simply does not have the money, time, or resources to undertake that venture. She only has a high school diploma, which she barely got as she was pregnant her senior year of high school. Her boyfriend left her two years ago, so she has had to support her two children on her own. Living paycheck to paycheck with government assistance simply is wearing her down both physically and emotionally. She works a large discount store, where she receives low pay, but fortunately she is able to have health insurance. Perhaps someday she will be promoted, but she is not holding her breath for that as management seems to favor other individuals for raises and promotions.

Since she works so much, she has little time to spend with her children. The children spend their time enrolled in school in kindergarten or in a head start program. She is thankful that her children can go to school, and she feels that the schools are treating her children well. However, after school is a different matter. They spend their time in daycare, until she can get off from her job, which sometimes is late in the evening. She wishes she could spend more time with her children, at this critical time in their lives. Yet she feels that there is no way out.

She only has a few family members as a support system for her situation. Many of her family members walked away from her when she became pregnant in high school. Sometimes

her mother helps to watch the children, but Keisha's mother has to work as well. She needs a support system, someone at least to be there, when simply she simply needs to talk to someone. It is hard for her to have a support system at this point.

Keisha was raised in the church somewhat, until she started a job in high school. She feels that her childhood church has let her go since then. She is afraid to look for a church home, as she feels she will be judged for being a single mom with two children. She feels that her situation doesn't allow her to live a "perfect" Christian life. Keisha does see that a community could be valuable to her and her children. She wants to be a part of a community that would love and support her family. Yet she is afraid to take that first step, so she waits for a community to reach out to her.

Another story is the story of Tom, a man in his forties who recently got out of a prison. He was married, but his wife has since moved on while he was in prison. He is a drug addict, with heroin being his drug of choice. He was sent to prison for possession of heroin and for intent to distribute. He was in prison for five years, where he felt that he lost part of himself there. He didn't receive any help while he was in prison for his drug habit, and is afraid he will relapse and perhaps land back in prison. He doesn't want this to happen, but feels powerless in his situation.

He sold drugs to pay for his own habit. He has been addicted to drugs for nearly 15 years. He describes the horror of the addiction, by doing things he doesn't want to do for his addiction. He sold most of his possessions to feed his habit, where he was only left with his apartment. When he turned to selling drugs to pay for his habit, his main focus became getting his fix, letting personal relationships slide and losing support from his family.

His parents refuse to speak with him and all but one of his siblings has cut contact with him. He currently is living in a half-way house, as he attempts to put his life back together. He wants to go to a drug rehab program, where he can get the skills to drop the addiction and begin to heal many years of pain and rejection in his life. This goal seems far-fetched though, as he hasn't been able to get into a program that fits his unique needs.

After 15 years of being addicted to drugs, it is somewhat of a miracle that he is alive. However, there is one major medical issue that has scarred him for life. Since he injected heroin, he had to use needles to in order to put the drugs in his body. These needles were not always clean and were often shared. From all of this, he has been diagnosed with AIDS, which has cast him away from society. While in prison he did receive medical attention for this, and he learned how to prevent the spread of the disease. Still, this will be a challenge for him, particularly if he relapses on heroin.

Tom feels isolated. He feels that he is an outcast. He has no support system. He wants to belong to a community. He wants to be loved for who he is and not to be judged as an addict. He doesn't want to live his life alone. He wants to be able to find place where people can treat him like a normal person.

Tom has tried to visit churches, but once people take a look at him, they instantly judge him on his appearance. He does continue to try to find a church home, so he can get back to his childhood faith. Tom does not know where he will end up, but hopes for the day when he will find a community that will love him for who he is and offer support and prayers so that he can move forward in his life.

Ignacio is a 50 year old man from Guatemala. He came to the United States to find work, so he can send money to his family back home. He speaks some English and is attempting to

learn and understand culture in the US. He is simply trying to get his feet under him, so he can work and live as well as he can so far away from home.

He has 6 children, with three married and three still at home. He was a coffee farmer initially, where he has raised coffee for years as a part of a multi-generational farm. This all changed a few years ago, when the price of coffee collapsed and he was no longer able to provide food and shelter for his family with the low prices that coffee received. He went from fully sustainable, to going hungry in just a year. He then decided to look for work elsewhere, so he could put food on the table.

His journey brought him to the US, where he was able to obtain a work visa and then found a job working for a local company. He is here legally, with a legitimate green card. However, with much discrimination going on concerning immigrants, he often gets lumped in as an illegal. He comes from a very religious family, but has been unable to find a church home. Ignacio is often set aside and has trouble culturally with many churches. Church is not the same in the US as it is in Guatemala. He has given up the search for a church home in the US. He is still spiritual, but is not happy how his search for a church has not worked out. Maybe someday he'll find a spiritual home in the US, but that future remains uncertain.

Those represented by these three individuals are but a small fraction of the people I worked with in the social service agency. I was amazed from the walks of life that people came from. All had a story. Some shared their story, some didn't. But regardless, I treated them as a brother and sister in Christ and I tried to reach them wherever they are in life.

So as a community of faith, what do we do with these three individuals? All three want to become a part of a church, but they feel like they face barriers to finding that spiritual home.

Some churches refuse to get out of the box and reach those individuals. It is a shame that they could not find a place that would accept them for who they are.

Social barriers cause them to not have a home. Society doesn't look at these people favorably. Yet they are children of God, like all people are. I believe that these individuals should be loved by a church and the church should be with them on their journey through life. While some of us may be uncomfortable with their choices, they still have the basic human right to love.

Society often dictates who, when, why, and how we help people. Society often sets up cultural barriers that don't allow us to reach people. Society has perceptions of people that we often create, whether they are true or not. But as a church community of Christ, we should follow Christ's example, and not allow social standards interfere. He broke convention, to help those in need.

Christ's life was full of times when he broke social convention to reach people. The Gospel lesson for today shows us Christ breaking the laws of the Sabbath to heal a man. Christ saw the man, heard his story, and then acted. He healed the man and commanded him to take his mat up and move. When members of society saw this, they told the man he was breaking the law by simply walking with his mat.

People didn't praise God that the man was healed. Nobody spoke in the story to say that it was a miracle indeed that he had been healed. No, society instead focused on the law and making sure things fell neatly into place. It was as if the miracle didn't matter, only whether the law was being followed. The people missed the important part of what had happened.

The healing also brought Jesus himself under fire as well, since he told the man to carry his mat. This is just another example of people missing the good that Christ did on the earth.

Instead of being astonished that he healed man, once again society saw that Christ was breaking the law. Many times Christ broke the law or broke societal norms to be with those who needed help. He came for the sick, the lonely, the sad, the poor, and so on. Christ didn't come to please those who were living just fine. He stepped out of the box to comfort those who needed comfort and love. He set the example that we should take after and incorporate into our mission and our story.

As a church community, what are we to do with this story? What direction are we to aim towards? How are we to spread the love of Christ to those who have little hope or those that need help to get back on their feet?

Faith Church has taken the right steps in supporting programs in Cheyenne to help people and to help those who are getting a fresh start. Faith Church can do good things for this community, and from what I have learned Faith Church is committed to helping God's people. I give thanks to God for what you as a community has done for those in the city of Cheyenne and for the help done elsewhere. I am richly blessed to pastor a community that sees the needs of those who need help and works toward building those people up. But I want to challenge the community to reach out farther, to reach out to those who need a spiritual home. We should follow the Great Commission and make disciples, especially to those individuals who represent the stories I told you today.

This is a message to affirm and celebrate what has been done, and to push ourselves further, because Christ pushed all the way for us on to the point of dying on a cross for us. He didn't have to die on a cross for us, but he did so, because he loved us that much. It would be a testament for the love of Christ by reaching out to those who are in need of a home, who are in need of a spiritual family where they can experience the love of Christ.

Much has been mentioned to me about growth in this church, and I am fully behind those goals. But to grow and reach out may require us to step outside of the box, to break what is normal and stand with individuals when it may not be the most popular thing to do. Christ gave us an example to reach out to those and break the rules if needed to get to people. We should embrace this idea, we should embrace the love God gives us and spread that love to those who need it the most. We don't have a specific type of individual that needs help, because those in need of help come from all walks of life. Welcoming all people to the pews of the church should be a priority for all of us, to be a loving congregation where single moms, drug addicts, and those trying to support their family can find a spiritual home. Many of us have had times when we were outcasts, where we could not find it with society's norms. But no matter where we are in life, no matter what has happened to us, no matter what society dictates about us, God loves us all and wants us to be closer to him. We are a people loved by the ultimate creator. I believe that we should spread that love to people. We should push that all people can experience the transforming power of Christ in their lives. We should aim for a society that loves all people from all walks of life wherever they are, and pray for the day when Christ's love for us can come through us at Faith Church, and from all churches in the world.

But what will we do to step out of the box? This is where studying the scriptures and praying together will be vital for our congregation. I believe it is important to follow Christ's example first and foremost. As a community we can find what we need to do. It's not going to be easy, but as long as we keep the focus on spreading the love of Christ, then we can be a spiritual home for the lost.

I pray that my message has been received in a manner where you feel that you are empowered and feel that you can make a change in this world. I pray that you feel we can love

the world from our viewpoint and help those who need it in this life. I believe that we should be empowered to break outside of the box and follow the example of Christ. We may not be the most popular people for loving people, but we know that love is what we are commanded to do. We have a great task ahead of us of sharing the love of God, but I pray with Christ as our guide, I know that we can step outside of the box and love others because we are loved. Paul often writes that we will all be one, there will not be distinctions between us, but we will be one people. We are here to love all people, to step out of the box and to meet those people where they are. This great task will bring us new hope and renewal in our lives, including those that we help. Amen.