



“We Join the Outsiders”

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Sermons at Central Park United Methodist Church

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When I was child, my parents insisted that my sister and I attend Sunday school. Every Sunday morning we washed up, dressed up, fixed our hair up, and ventured forth. Some of my earliest recollections involve interior snapshots of that small Presbyterian church. I recall the toddler room where we places Salerno butter cookie rings on all our fingers before devouring them; running with a handmade kite on the church’s lawn in the summertime; playing tic-tac-toe on the weekly bulletin with my father as we sat in the balcony on mornings we were allowed to skip our class and attend service instead. My memories of church remind me that I have always been a religious “insider;” familiar with the rhythm and order of regular church attendance.

Many of you, I'm sure, have similar stories to tell. But if the Church of Jesus Christ is to continue into the next generation (and the one beyond that) we must find new people to populate our pews; people unfamiliar with Church culture, but who are yearning to know Jesus. Because that's the point, isn't it? You can go to church every day and still not know Jesus. You can claim religiosity and still not live righteously.

Being an insider doesn't shield anyone from sin; in fact, sometimes we're lulled into a kind of false complacency, mistaking our church membership for Kingdom membership. Worship is one important component of faith, but it is not the only one! How we love one another is where our allegiance to Jesus really shows. And how we treat the outsiders- the least, the lost, the suffering- is the real measure of our discipleship.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, when the early Church was growing by leaps and bounds as the Holy Spirit moved among the people, the Disciples became quickly overwhelmed by the many tasks of ministry. In Acts chapter 6 we read that some within the faith community complained *"because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food."* (Acts 6:1)

You'll recall that Biblical teaching explicitly instructs believers to provide for widows and orphans. the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, *"It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may ap-*

point to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.’ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:2-7)

We now think of these men as the very first deacons, appointed to assist the apostles in the work of ministry. So Philip became a religious “insider,” a servant leader in the Church of Jesus Christ, seeking to assist any who had need. His encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch was not by chance, but was instead orchestrated by God in God’s wisdom in order to bring an “outsider” into the fold. The eunuch, you see, would have been considered “unclean” by the standards of those early believers. Which makes Philip’s decision to jump up into the chariot and sit side by side with the foreigner all the more radical.

And so the example Philip set for us is one of inclusion: the joy of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to a stranger, without regard to station or race. Imagine the freedom and acceptance that man must have felt as Philip baptized him in the water along the roadside, enfolding him forever into the Body of Christ. No longer an outsider, but a beloved brother and member of Christ’s holy church.

The love of God in Jesus Christ is just like that: indiscriminate, undeserved, inclusive; full of grace and acceptance and for-

givenness for sin. And we, who have professed our faith in his Divine Lordship, are called to act in ways that are radically inclusive of others, enfolding them all in the warmth of Christ's big blanket of agape love.

This is the highest form of love: unconditional and all-encompassing, as is God's love for humankind. Even the worst sinners can become insiders, for *"God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God."* (1 John 4:15) *"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."* (1 John 4:20-21)

By this great love we are made known to the world, and Jesus Christ made known through us. *"Therefore let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,"* (1 John 3:18) not mistaking our church membership for Kingdom membership, but striving instead to be Christ's love for all the world, so that every insider - every outsider- may worship Him together, and for all time.