What Disciples Do

Disciples Seek & Share

OT 27C-22

Luke 15: 1-10

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Luke 15: 1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable:

“Which one of you,

having a hundred sheep and losing one of them,

does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness

and go after the one that is lost

until he finds it?

When he has found it,

he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

And when he comes home,

he calls together his friends and neighbors,

saying to them,

‘Rejoice with me,

for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

Just so, I tell you,

there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents

than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins,

if she loses one of them,

does not light a lamp, sweep the house,

and search carefully until she finds it?

When she has found it,

she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying,

‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

Just so, I tell you,

there is joy in the presence of the angels of God

over one sinner who repents.”

*What Disciples Do*

“Disciples Seek & Share”

Some of you have previously heard me refer to “evangelism” as the “E-word.”

It’s not a bad word. In fact, evangelism is a wonderful, beautiful word.

It means—Good News… or, in verb form it means “to share good news.”

But amid mainline Protestantism, evangelism hasn’t been treated as if it’s beautiful. Throughout the past 60 years, amid the rise of the evangelical movement and its marriage with rather far-right politics, many mainline Protestants—Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians—ran away from the word… rarely engaging it ourselves… usually only speaking the word to proclaim what we’re not. “Oh—we’re not evangelical. We’re not one of *those* Christians.”

As I’ve shared before, much of this stemmed from the mainline church’s desire to distance itself from what was viewed as exclusivism and condemnatory judgment coming from the evangelical movement of the church.

Now… let’s just tag the fact that judging the entire evangelical movement of the Church in a purely negative way is, in and of itself, judgmental. But that’s not the point.

Rather… when we ran away from evangelism… we thought we were doing it for good reason. We didn’t want anything to do with ministry that resembled the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson this morning. Remember, the Pharisees were the respected religious leaders in Israel whose job was, largely, to fence the community. The Pharisees focused on what the Hebrew law said was good and bad… pure and impure. So they sought to fence the community in order to protect those they believed were acceptable to God from those they deemed unacceptable to God.

Naturally, when they saw Jesus hanging out with scummy tax collectors and known sinners… they didn’t understand. They knew Jesus was a man of God. As a rabbi himself, they knew Jesus understood the Torah front to back… so they knew Jesus was well aware of all the ritual and purity do’s and don’ts. So they asked him: “Why on earth are you hanging out with these people, Jesus? And not just hanging out with them… but even eating with them? You know you can’t do that.”

We tend to glance over it. But that note about eating with the sinners—that’s a big one. Because we need to remember… in that ancient society, to eat with someone was to identify them as part of your community. As someone you deemed to be your equal.

So the Pharisees didn’t understand… How could Jesus eat with his disciples one day… Hebrew leaders the next day… and then turn around and eat with people like drug dealers and pimps and corrupt politicians the following day.

Where was the fence? You can’t be a part of the acceptable and unacceptable crowds at the same time!

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There’s an important tension here we shouldn’t easily dismiss, Towson Presbyterian.

On the one hand… inclusion is our very first value. As Christians who believe in the inclusive love and grace of God… as those who believe Jesus came not just for some but for each and all… *of course* we can see how important it’d be for Jesus to embrace those society did not. What we see here in Luke is, well… Jesus being… Jesus… demonstrating the way of love and grace.

But while we may see it… do we follow it? As his disciples today, do we—you and me—seek and share the love of God with all?

I want to… but I don’t. And I suspect you don’t either.

I mean… I wonder what would happen if a trio of pimps came in from the city and sat down. Or perhaps some members of the Bloods or Crips or… heck… Hells Angels.

Would we embrace them the way Jesus embraced the sinners and tax collectors? I don’t know.

What I do know is that we certainly haven’t invited them… at least as far as I can tell.

Which… whether we want to see it or not… reveals a tension we can’t ignore. How can we proclaim a God who yearns for the whole world to uncover God’s love and grace… but then do so little to share the love and grace we claim to celebrate? The tension is real.

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About 15 years ago, I gathered with some church leaders in NJ to explore present-day approaches to evangelism. And even there… at that meeting… this tension was clear.

As Gary and I were leaving the meeting together, he said, “You know, Rob, it’s not like people don’t know we’re here.”

“Whadda ya mean, Gary?”

“I mean… the church isn’t a secret organization. People drive by our churches all the time. Our worship time is on the front sign. And so is our phone number and website. If they want to learn more… they can come to worship… or visit the website. And we’ll welcome them with open arms. But let’s not pretend people don’t know we’re here or what we’re about.”

I’m embarrassed to say I didn’t challenge Gary’s notion that day… largely because I thought he had a point.

After all, the Church is one of the oldest institutions in the world. Throughout its history, it’s lived both amid the outskirts of society… and in the very heart of empires. And while the church is currently in decline throughout Europe and North America… even today… you can find churches all over the place. More churches than schools, in many towns.

But that doesn’t mean most people know who the church is… or what the church does.

In fact, studies reveal that, with each and every passing year… an increasing percentage of our society… does *not* know the story of God’s love for them in Jesus Christ.

In fact, in 2008, the scholar Martha Grace Reese revealed a landmark study showing that while most high school students in America celebrate Christmas thanks to its secularization… a majority of high school students do not—do *not*—know the Christmas story. So even though most people celebrate Christmas… most have no idea that, at least according to our tradition, it is a celebration of God loving them so much that God became human—to live with them and for them and to show them life in all its fullness.

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But that’s belief. Let’s talk about who the Church is and what we do.

Getting back to Gary’s response—“People know we’re here… they pass our buildings every day”—what do you imagine most people think of when they think of church?

A place of love and acceptance? A place for support and accountability? A community with whom to grow? Ask questions? Share doubts? Or practice grace?

Man… I hope so. I’d love nothing more than for people who aren’t a part of church to picture *that* when they think of church.

But if I’m being honest, that’s *not* what I think most people picture. No… when people who don’t have a relationship with the Church pass, I suspect many think:

* church is just a building that’s open on Sunday morning where people sing and pray.
* Or they may picture church as this condemnatory mouthpiece of the religious right… and assume our faith is just an excuse for phony moral condemnation.
* Or they might think we’re just an antiquated institution that reads an ancient book and adheres to ancient traditions that have nothing to do with life today.

**So to be clear… most people have no idea—no idea—that there’s a movement of Christianity that is all about approaching an inclusive God of love with curiosity… while responding to God with nothing but compassion and courage.**

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Alison—our wonderful Director of Communications and Connections—shared what I think is a great example of this. Alison and her husband, Josh, were in a wedding recently. Her husband, Josh, who is a pastor at University Baptist Church in Baltimore City, officiated the service. And the whole thing was beautiful and joyful and a wonderful celebration.

The day after the ceremony, Alison and Josh joined the rest of the wedding party at a local pub for one more night of fun.

And as the evening progressed… and everyone could continue to see for themselves just how fun and authentic and all-around awesome Alison and Josh are—they were surprised to learn that not only was Josh a pastor, but Alison also worked for a church.

It didn’t fit their understanding of church. So the group asked them, “How much did you guys need to lie to get your jobs?”

I love it. It’s as if they wanted to know, “How in the world could people who drink beer and hang out at a pub and dance and laugh and are so much fun to be with… how could they possibly work for a stuffy, pious, judgmental institution like the church.” So they asked Alison and Josh, “how much did you have to lie to get your jobs.”

How much do you need to hide about who you really are?

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You see, friends… while Gary was right—people do pass our building all the time—they know our buildings are her—that *doesn’t* mean they have any idea who we are or what we do… or why we do it. And if they think they know who we are… it’s likely they’re gravely mistaken.

People who didn’t grow up in church… and those who have only ever known exclusive, condemnatory expressions of Christianity do **not** yet know that there are churches like ours where people are invited to come and be their true, authentic selves. They don’t know there is a community here where people both study the Bible and go on hikes and feed the hungry and still get funky at weddings.

And the only way they’ll ever discover such love… such inclusion… such welcome… such meaning… such life… the only way they’ll find it is if we share it with them.

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As the parables reveal… God’s love doesn’t wait around for the lost to magically return. God’s love doesn’t just throw up its hands and wait for God’s people to suddenly show up to be amid God’s community.

No… the love of God leaves the 99 and turns over everything in the house in order to seek and share love with even one… even one who needs to uncover it.

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But there’s the rub… right?

Sharing our faith… Seeking and sharing… it makes us uncomfortable. We picture the way the Church has done it in decades past… sending colonizing missionaries to foreign lands… or proselytizing in order to “save souls for Jesus.” And we want nothing to do with that.

So we have gotten really, really good at compartmentalizing our faith. Fencing when and where and with whom we dare even talk about faith or church.

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And you’d think that I… as a pastor… would have very little opportunity to compartmentalize faith. First, as a pastor, I shouldn’t *want* to compartmentalize my faith. But more than that, as a pastor… I live and breathe church most of my waking hours. Not only do I work at church, but most of my friends are churchgoers or pastors themselves. So you’d think it’d be just about impossible for me to compartmentalize my faith.

But on Facebook and Instagram… there’s another compartment. On social media… there’s this other world of people I know from my youth and college days who don’t know me as Pastor Rob. And I really never pay that compartment much attention… except for when I go to “share” one of our church’s Facebook or Instagram posts.

And that’s where it happened. Earlier this year I caught myself wondering… when I share one of TPC’s awesome Facebook posts… how my non-church friends receive it.

Am I posting too much about church? Have they “silenced” or “unfollowed” my profile? It got me second guessing what I post… and how frequently I post it. So I started paying more attention to both what I share… and how it’s responded to.

And here’s what is clear. While a few here and there have no interest in my shares of faith or ministry… I have learned, dear friends, that the vast majority of my social media friends and network appreciate what I share. Many are hungry to hear about a faith that lifts up inclusion and curiosity. They appreciate seeing pictures of church folks laughing and having fun. They’re encouraged that a faith community is naming hard things like systemic racism and gun violence while seeking to care for the last and least.

Which then made me realize how powerful this opportunity is… and how important it is, TPC, that we not miss it.

For as we’ve come to see amid the creation of our virtual campus… the virtual space—now more than ever—is where we are called to share our faith. The virtual space is where people are gathering… and where we can best share stories from our life together that reveal just some of the ways faith is making a difference… both in our lives and the lives of others.

For example… if you like and follow Towson Presbyterian Church’s Facebook page or Instagram feed… you will find things you can easily share with the click of singular button.

* You can share… a video of your pastors sumo wrestling. And who doesn’t want to see Joel kicking my butt?
* More seriously… you can share about the study of poetry and Scripture that’s coming up.
* You can share about the Blessing of the Animals later today.
* You can share about the Men’s group getting together for beers and conversation.
* Or Circle 13 and their upcoming study.
* You can share about the group for single women who gather for laughter, support, and good food.
* And you can share stories about the people being fed.
* Or the students we are serving.
* Or the children who are singing.
* Or the wine we are tasting.
* And the journeys we are taking together in faith.

Do you see what I’m getting at?

I don’t want to be subtle… so I’ll be blunt.

If the only people sharing our church’s social posts are staff members and a handful of others… who are we really seeking… and what are we really sharing?

On the other hand, imagine what might happen if we all begin to intentionally share just one thing every week? What if we all—everyone with a Facebook or Instagram account—commit for the next 3, 6, 12 months to sharing just one of TPC’s social media posts every week?

Can you picture it?

* How far we could reach?
* How many lives we can touch?
* How many people might uncover the love of God amid this community of faith right here—virtually and in-person—where they can be exactly who God created them to be… and where they can find love and supported as they seek to uncover more about who and whose they are… and the blessings they’re called to be.

Can you picture it? Can you imagine how powerful our faith sharing can be? And the lives that might be touched?

I hope so, because I’m asking you, dear friends, to help make it so.

In fact… I’m not just asking you… I’m ***challenging*** you. Share your faith. And if you have social media accounts and are comfortable using them… I’m challenging you to follow TPC on Facebook or Instagram. And each and every week… share just one post. That’s it. Share one TPC post each and every week.

It might not seem like that important of a thing to do. But if we all do it, friends… picture the difference it can make amid a world that so desperately needs it. Frankly… I believe it’s never been more important for us to share our faith. So thank God it’s never been easier.

So will you? Will you accept the challenge? Will you seek and share the love of God? I challenge you to pray about it. And as you pray about it… picture it. The difference you, Towson Presbyterian Church, can make… and the love you can share. One post… one week at a time. Amen.