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Bethel UCC
January 26, 2020
Matthew 4 & 1 Corinthians 1

“The Troublesome Thing About Community”

Will you pray with me?

Creator God – God of relationships – be with us this morning. This afternoon. Move in us and through us. Grant us patience, compassion, and most of all, gratitude. May the words and my mouth and the meditations of all these gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, Our Rock and our Redeemer.

So, here’s the troublesome thing about community: It’s hard.

Simple as that.

Paul knew it. Jesus knows it.

It’s hard because it requires other people.

And other people can sometimes be difficult.

Community means learning to live with others who we may love AND who we may find irritating – or even incomprehensible.

It requires figuring out how to do life together – loving and caring and navigating this world with more than just yourself to think about.

So, in the way only Bible nerds can find humor, our lectionary texts for this week are pretty appropriate for the MANY churches undertaking their annual meetings this weekend –

seriously, almost every church whose newsletter I receive, is gathering this afternoon to review annual reports, approve budgets, and hopefully maybe also doing some creative things like dreaming together.

We’ll be in good company, Bethel.

But back to the present moment: in one of our texts – we get Matthew’s version of the calling of the first disciples as well as an illustration of the growing popularity of Jesus’ ministry – which is starting to attract ALL kinds of people from ALL kinds of places.

And in the other – we get the first of Paul’s letters to the community in Corinth.

The first text – an illustration of the stark transformation a changed heart and life can bring. An image of community as it sometimes is – an exciting, thrilling AND completely uncontrollable mass of people somehow all pointed in the same direction.

And the second – a picture of community a few years, or maybe decades in. A picture of those very human moments when we squabble about the wrong thing, when we find arbitrary ways to sort and divide ourselves – forgetting that under it all, we have the same Creator to thank for our lives.

It’s all very relatable. Community in all its forms – exciting, new or established and intimate – it’s all challenging.

First things first – the calling of the disciples.

When Jesus calls, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” – make no mistake: the changing of our hearts and lives is no simple ask.

It can seem like it when we hear the stories of Simon and Andrew, James and John.

Who somehow, miraculously, seem to have no trouble, no hesitation, about setting aside their lives, their identities, their FAMILIES – in order to respond to Jesus’ call.

I know some of you have responded to a call like this – a call which changed your whole life, your whole identity, your whole perspective on something.

These call stories can seem pretty out there to me, but it’s also an opportunity to imagine what it might be like to say yes to a call, to a vision, that fully.

If you’ve never gone all in on something that doesn’t quite make sense – maybe ask yourself about that. Open yourself up to the possibility.

Because occasionally, perhaps frequently, you are going to encounter things in this world that change everything.

And sometimes, it may be God who’s calling you to that unexpected change.

It may just be God who’s inviting you to the kingdom of heaven coming your way.

And you don’t want to live life missing the opportunities to have your heart broken wide open and your life transformed.

Let God loose in your life – stay alert to God’s presence – and it’s going to happen sooner or later, I promise. Your heart and life will be changed.

One of the reasons I love David Whyte’s work on gratitude is he describes gratitude as simply paying attention. It comes from being awake to the world and your life within it.

Andrew and Simon, somehow in the middle of their concentration on fishing, were ready and alert enough to follow this strange man.

James and John – repairing their nets with their father – somehow also hear enough and are open to Jesus’ call to leave behind their boat and their father.

To leave it all: their identity, their livelihood, and their family.

It’s a significant sacrifice and utter transformation – all in the name of following this guy and experiencing the kingdom of heaven.

The disciples begin to form a little community – a new one to all of them – but one that will carry them and hold them through some of the most challenging days of their lives.

And then there’s the community that forms in each of the synagogues Jesus stops to teach in.

This community seems a little unruly.

Notice when the kingdom of heaven comes close – the community Jesus forms isn’t full of the elite and wealthy and powerful. Sure – some of them are there – but mostly its full of people from the margins.

Fishermen.

People suffering from mental illness and illnesses of the spirit. Those fighting diseases, those living with paralysis and epilepsy.

People from other cultures.

Gentiles.

All of these and many more show up to form this first Jesus-following community.

And I’m guessing the leaders of those local synagogues were a little flustered, if not altogether outraged, that this unruly community suddenly showed up on their doorsteps.

Or maybe they were grateful – simply grateful that the kingdom of heaven decided to show up in their neighborhood for a time.

God's saving grace, God's healing love, God's transforming power – suddenly in their midst.

And with it, lots of people.

Community is hard, Bethel – sometimes it's complicated, messy, crowded – but it is worth it, because in it, we may just witness the kingdom of heaven.

Most of you know I grew up in the church. I was the preacher's kid. Every church I spent time in as a child had something in common.

Because of who my family was – my dad, my mom – I was loved before I was even known. I got in with them – which is how it should be for all children in our communities – unconditional love.

It's part of what gave me a glimpse of what God's love looks like – love no matter what.

But as an adult, I came to realize another dimension of this.

God loves you BECAUSE God knows you. From the get go. Without you even trying.

But humans need a chance to get to know you.

It was a rude awakening going to my first church where no one knew who I was. Church didn't feel like church to me without that sense of belonging, of being known.

But what I learned as I finally gave myself fully to a faith community as an adult was that it is so much sweeter to be loved for me, than for who my family is.

It is so much better to be known for yourself, than for who you're related to.

Who you know.

What celebrity preacher baptized you isn't important – though the community of Corinth thought it was.

Who you know doesn't matter. Who YOU are matters.

And for people to know who YOU are, you have to give something of yourself to community.

For people to fall in love with you – for people to do community with you – it requires you share a little of yourself.

Generosity is a sharing of self. It's a response to gratitude.

Sure – it's a sharing of money and resources.

But it's also simply a giving of yourself. Of whatever you have to give – the best cake recipe, painting skills, a gift for teaching, a passion for seeking justice, or even just the gift of time.

Time and presence can be one of the most generous gifts you will ever give.

Generosity – in response to gratitude – is what really starts to build resilient communities and what gives them shape.

I don't know all that was going on in Corinth. But I'm guessing part of the problem was that they weren't spending much time being grateful for one another. Maybe they weren't even spending much time together.

Gratitude for Christ – for the kingdom of heaven in their midst – might have ended a lot of the quarrels in Corinth.

A changing of hearts and minds – a readiness to see the kingdom of heaven – was needed in that community. You can hear that in the exasperated words of Paul.

And I'm guessing it was probably needed again, a few years after Paul wrote this.

Because a changing of heart and life?

It's not a one-time transformation.

Impatience, frustration, fear, anger, are all going to find their way to come into our lives and hearts.

Because we're human.

This work of changing our hearts and lives and following Jesus is an every day, all the days, kind of work.

We may get it for a while – and then we may find ourselves irrationally angry at tippy pots and we gotta start over again.

Gratitude is a good place to start.

As Meister Eckhart says, if the only prayer you ever say is thank you, it will be enough.

Gratitude will help change your heart. And eventually your life.

Gratitude makes space for generosity.

Gratitude gives us the courage we need to share a bit of ourselves – so we may be known and loved for who we are.

Gratitude helps us remember we are not the creators of this universe and generosity helps us realize we have something to contribute to it.

And when we contribute in the same direction, when we build community together, when we allow community to get big and messy and hard and complicated – with God pulling us in new, unexpected directions... I believe we witness the kingdom of heaven.

Community is hard. It's troublesome.

And faith communities?? Which we hope are following the lead of God aren't any easier.

But they are worth it. Because like those two trees on the front of your Order of Worship – we grow stronger when we have one another to lean on.

When we experience the kingdom of heaven with a crowd of witnesses around us – we know we didn't imagine it.

Here comes the kingdom of heaven! It was and is truly at hand, Beth'el Church.

May our hearts be changed and our eyes opened, so we may witness the kingdom when it comes!

Amen.