

Where We Meet Jesus

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Throughout the gospels, Jesus has a lot to say about what he asks of us.

For example,

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“The greatest among you must be like a servant.”

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength.”

But there are three specific places where Jesus not only tells us what it means to follow him, but where he personally identifies... things that he believes are so important that it's not enough to just tell us that he wants us to do those things but that he is present with us when we do.

“When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

In the gathered worshipping community, in what we do every Sunday morning or in our small groups or Sunday school or youth group or even just a conversation between two of us about things that matter, Jesus promises to be here with us.

“This is my body, given for you. This is my blood poured out for you.”

In the sacrament of Holy Communion, Jesus, himself becomes our host. This table is no longer our table, but Jesus' table and we are invited to be his guests.

And finally, in our Scripture this week, “Whatever you do for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do for me.” I think this is one of the most profound statements Jesus ever said and it should cause us to be very intentional about how we care for those who the world often considers the “least:” the poor, the homeless, the prisoners, the sick.

When I was in college, I started attending a church in downtown Birmingham Alabama where about ½ of the congregation were members of the homeless community. But it actually took me a while to get there. You see, months earlier, I had sort of had an epiphany. Even though I had gone to church all my life, had been in Sunday school and youth group, and even had personally read my Bible quite often, it never really hit me of how much our faith asks of us in regards to caring for the poor and the vulnerable. There are over 2000 verses in the Bible that talk about caring for the poor. The most common theme Jesus talked about was the kingdom of God. The second most common theme was caring for the poor and a lot of time when Jesus was talking about the kingdom of God, he was talking about it as a place where the poor find justice and hope.

After beginning to realize that a central component of our faith is to concern ourselves with the poor and vulnerable, I met with the university minister to ask him questions about what I had started to believe and in that conversation, he told me, "You should go worship at Church of the Reconciler. It's an amazing place that not only serves people who are poor but where rich and poor, black and white, straight and gay are all a part of the same church, worshipping together." I thought, "Yes, that's exactly what I need to do." So the next Sunday, I got in my car, pulled off the interstate at the downtown exit and as I pulled up to the stop light, I saw someone begging for money. I started to get a little nervous. I made my way to church and I saw a few people sleeping on the sidewalk outside the church. And do you know what I did? I turned my car around and went back to my dorm room. It actually took me about three weeks before I worked up my courage enough to walk through the doors and go in.

I had taken the first step. But I had one more step to take. You see, my purpose in going there was that I thought I was supposed to help people who were homeless. Now don't get me wrong, we are called to give food to the hungry, to work for a world where everyone can have a house, to make sure all people have their basic needs met, but so often those of us with resources can walk into those situations thinking we are the ones with the solutions and they are the ones with the problems. That's what I thought when David, a homeless man recognized that I was a first time visitor and went over to welcome me.

"Welcome to Church of the Reconciler," he said.

A little nervous, I shook his hand and said, "My name is R.G. and I'm here to help out."

He laughed a little and said, "Well, before you help out, why don't we get you some coffee and find a place to sit." The next person I met was Mildred. Mildred had been a missionary in Zimbabwe for 40 years and when she retired she became a part of Church of the Reconciler. Now here's the thing about Mildred, she wouldn't let you get away with just showing up to help if you weren't willing to be a part of the community. Each Sunday after worship, we had a meal for anyone who wanted to attend and obviously a lot of people from the homeless community came there to eat. Different churches took turns sponsoring the food. So one week, one church would bring and serve the food. The next week another would. And that's a great thing to do, right? Those churches were doing exactly what Jesus was asking in our Scripture today. They were feeding the hungry.

But there was still one problem. There was this big serving table in between the people serving and the people being served...almost like a dividing wall. So here's what Mildred did. She would walk up to the people serving and gently take one person by the hand and say, "We don't need you back here. Come on get a plate for yourself and follow me." They reluctantly would do what she asked because how you can say "no" to the 80 year old retired missionary. And then after they had their plate, Mildred would say, "Good. Now let me take you to meet Jesus." And she would take them to a table where a group of homeless people were sitting, people that Mildred always knew by name and she would introduce everyone to each other and then invite

them to sit down and share a meal together. Week after week she would do this and finally, after I got to know her a little bit, I worked up the courage to ask her why.

Here's what she said: "You see, R.G., these church groups come here because they want to do a good thing. They want to feed hungry people. But they are in danger of missing out on what's most important. We're a church and that means the best thing we have to offer people is Jesus and Jesus tells us that if we want to find him, we have to go to the poor, the hungry, the sick because that's where he is. They want to come here to feed people. It's my job to help them meet Jesus."

And that's when I realized that I wasn't supposed to come to Church of the Reconciler to help the homeless. What could I as a 19 year old kid possibly do for them anyway? I needed to come to Church of the Reconciler not because they needed me to be there but because I needed to be there. I needed to be there because Jesus is always to be found among the poor, among the homeless, among the broken and hurting. "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me."

This is the last Sunday before Advent, the time when we will intentionally prepare ourselves to celebrate the coming of Christ in the world even as long for his return. But as we enter that season, it's important to remember that the coming of Christ is not just an event in the past or a hope for the future. It's a present reality. Christ comes to us all the time in the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, and the prisoner if we only have the eyes to recognize him.

Today is also the end of our pledge campaign where you are invited to make your financial pledge to support the work of the church for the upcoming year. And you've probably noticed on our pledge card that there is a space to make a pledge to our General Fund which pays for staff salaries, building upkeep, and the programs of our church. And there is a place to make a pledge to the Benevolence Fund that allows us to share our resources with others throughout the Milton and greater Boston community that are serving those who are marginalized. It is such a faithful response to what the gospel of Jesus asks of us to remember that we are not just called to support our internal work but that we are called to share our resources with the world around us.

But here's the thing I hope we realize. When it comes to connecting with God, to living out our faith, these two components of supporting the work of our church and supporting those around us are two sides of the same coin. We meet Jesus here in this place when we come together for worship, for Sunday school, for youth group, for small groups.

"Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them."

And we meet Jesus when we share our resources with those who are in need, and especially when we go and connect with them personally.

"Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me."

Church consultant Lyle Schaller says that every church should ask themselves this question: "If your church closed tomorrow, who besides your members would care?" It's a great question because it reminds us that the impact we have in the surrounding community is just as important as what we do for those who are already a part of our church. We've been asking ourselves the question, "Why Church?" "Why does church still matter?" And I think one of the most important reasons is that we do not just exist for ourselves. We exist to share the love and grace and hope of God with those around us and especially with those who are living in poverty and suffering under the weight of injustice. If church does in fact still matter, that commitment to care for the poor and vulnerable must be just as important to who we are as anything we do in this building on a Sunday morning.

My guess is there's a lot of reasons why you come to church. Maybe you come because here you feel peace and love. Maybe you come because you want to be inspired. Maybe you come because you want to be part of an organization that gives to those in the surrounding community. But my guess is that there's not too many of you who would say, "I come to church because I love for people to ask me for money."

I get it.

I think sometimes we think of pledge campaigns almost like a necessary annoyance...you know, sort of like those NPR fund drives. We have to ask for money because we have to pay the power bill. And that's true. We do. We have to raise our operational expenses to keep doing all the things that we do find meaningful.

But there's also another way to think of it. In a few minutes when you are invited to bring your pledge card to the altar, when you are invited to bring your groceries for the food drive to the altar, you are doing way more than just making sure we keep our bills paid. You're even doing way more than doing a good thing by sharing food with those who are hungry. What you're really doing is making sure that we continue to be a place where we can meet Jesus and that we continue to go to the places where Jesus hangs out, among the poor, the sick, the hurting.

And that task might actually be something pretty exciting to support with our time, our energy, and, yes, with our money. Amen.