

I want to invite you to think for a minute about meaningful communities that you've been a part of. What made them meaningful for you?

Specifically, what was it like when you first joined that community?

How did they make you feel welcome?

How did they break down the division between insiders and outsiders? H

ow did you make the transition from feeling like a guest in that community to feeling like a part of it?

As we continue our sermon series on community, I think these are vital questions for us because they invite those of us who are already a part of this community to consider what it might feel like for someone to come here for the first time.

The truth is that, no matter how great a church may be, it takes a lot of courage to come here for the very first time. And for those of you who are first time visitors or still relatively new to our church, please know that I don't take the courage it took for you to walk through the doors lightly. I know that we can put all the right words on our website, I can say the right things about being welcoming and loving and accepting from the pulpit, but you never really know, do you, if there's weight behind those words. So to all who have had the courage to walk through these doors, we see you. Thank you for your courage.

I hope it has been not just a good experience but a great experience for you and, if it hasn't, I'd love to know about it because I know this is a church that wants you to feel welcomed, loved, and accepted.

And I think one way we as a church can do our best to ensure that anyone who comes will have that kind of good experience is to imagine what it would feel like coming here for the first time and to imagine what would make that experience feel good.

For one, I think the community has to feel authentic like we talked about last week. But secondly, I think the community needs to be humble. But before I say more about what a humble community looks like, let me say a little about what I don't mean. Being humble doesn't mean we shouldn't be proud of who we are and the work we are doing. I'm so proud of this church.

And being humble doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about the good things that are happening here. I hope all of you talk about it because if we don't talk about, no one will know that there's a community here they might like to be a part of.

Rather, I think being a humble community has everything to do with where our focus is – is our focus turned inward on ourselves or is it turned outwards towards others. I think that's the

lesson Jesus tried to teach the disciples in our Scripture today. After spending all this time with Jesus, after listening to his teachings, after witnessing his miracles, after seeing how he always welcomed those who were considered the least and the last, after all that, the disciples got into an argument about which one of them was the greatest.

And apparently, this wasn't that uncommon of an experience for them. All four gospels have stories about the disciples arguing over which one is greater, which one loves Jesus more, which one is the "better" follower. In the gospel of John, they even argue over who will have the seats of honor in heaven.

Over and over again, Jesus has to remind them not only how ridiculous it is that they are arguing about who is better than who but that true greatness is not about receiving the recognition or the accolades but it's about serving others. Jesus said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then Jesus gives a concrete example. He invites a child to come up and says, "Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me." Do you see how Jesus is trying to get the disciples to change their focus. Instead of focusing on themselves and on where each one ranks in the pecking order of greatness, he instead invites them to focus on a child.

How can you care for a child? How can you welcome a child?

It seems that Jesus agrees with the age old adage that if we want to see the values of a community, we should look at how that community welcomes its youngest members. Or to bring it closer to home, if we ever have a kid in church running around or making noise and I get perturbed because I feel it's distracting you from the profound words I have to say in my sermon, then I'm being like the disciples. I'm focusing on myself. But if we as a community can say, "Yes, we love our worship experience but nothing is more important than making sure our children feel loved and welcome even if that means a baby might cry sometimes or a toddler might run around," then we are starting to live into the kind of community Jesus calls us to be.

You see, I work hard on my sermons, and I really appreciate the kind words so many of you often say to me about my sermons. But there will never be a single sermon that I can ever preach that will be as important as a 4 year old just intuitively knowing that they are loved and supported and welcomed by this community. Nothing is more important than that.

And so I think one thing being a humble community means, one thing I think Jesus is trying to teach us, is to not take ourselves so seriously that we can't be a community that welcomes children, a community that welcomes everyone.

While I would argue that being a community that is focused outward rather than inward is the most important part of being a humble community and a good gauge of how well we're doing in that regard is how well we welcome children, I think there are several other markers of what being a humble community looks like.

First, a humble community works with others. No church, no community can do everything that needs doing by themselves and yet so many try to do just that. I am so grateful for the relationship we have with East Congregational Church because there's no way we could have had such a wonderful summer of worship if we hadn't worshipped together. I doubt we could pull Nourish off by ourselves.

Or we can think about our neighbors, First Parish. Together, we run the Rainbow Youth Alliance so that queer kids in Milton have a place that they know is safe and fun where they can simply be themselves without having to explain who they are. We probably couldn't do that by ourselves, but with our partners we can.

Or the last few years when the Milton Interfaith Clergy Association representing each of our respective congregations worked together to provide housing, job training, tutoring, and summer camp experiences to two refugee families who are not an active part of the Milton community. We can't do everything by ourselves and it's so arrogant to think we can. But by being aware of our need for collaboration, we can do so much together.

Secondly, a humble community makes room for others – and their ideas. Think back to the beginning of this sermon when I asked you to imagine what it's like going into a new community for the first time. Is it a good experience if you join a community and you get the message, "Let me tell you how we do things here so you can get on board." Of course, we want to educate people about how things work, but guess what, new people have ideas that we might need to hear, beliefs that might help us more fully live into who God is calling us to be. Instead of responding, "Well, we've always done things this way," a humble community says, "Well, we've always done things this way, but maybe there's a better way." To truly be welcoming, we not only want more people to come here but we want more people to come here and share their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. To truly be welcoming means that we are always open to having new people change us.

Finally, related to being willing to change, a humble community does not get defensive when we're challenged. And I know this is so unnatural, right. Whenever I'm called out, my mind immediately goes to all the dozens of things I could say to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt why I'm right and the other person is wrong. And yet, nothing is less productive. Being humble means that we are open to the possibility we might be wrong about some things. It doesn't mean we're bad people or that we're a bad community. It just means that we are a work in progress...just like every other person, just like every other community. And if we can receive challenge and critique as an invitation to grow rather than as an attack to defend against, then think about what all might be possible.

I began by asking you to imagine what would feel good walking into a new community for the first time. I want to end by inviting us to remember the very bedrock of Christian theology. You see, the way God came to us through Jesus is the very essence of humility. I mean think about it. God came to us in the most humble, the most vulnerable way possible – as a helpless baby born to a poor peasant girl in a barn because that was all that was available. Or think the things

this baby would grow up to do – he would feed people, he would wash feet, he would serve others. When he asked the disciples to remember that true greatness is not in propping oneself up but in serving others, he was only asking them to do the very things he always did. And finally, in perhaps the greatest mystery, we hold that God through Jesus laid down God's very life, completely turning upside down the very notion of power.

From his birth to his death, Jesus came to us in humility. So let's heed the words of Jesus that true greatness is in serving others. And let's remember that the first step is to turn outward rather than inward. Let's remember that we can't do everything by ourselves and that we need others not just to share the work but to push us and challenge us so that we might truly be a place where all can belong, grow, and engage the world in acts of service and justice. Amen.