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Mark 2:13-16   
Let’s Get Real as a Church

Rev. Kerry Smith   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 2:13-16 Common English Bible

Jesus went out beside the lake again. The whole crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he continued along, he saw Levi, Alphaeus’ son, sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Levi got up and followed him. Jesus sat down to eat at Levi’s house. Many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples. Indeed, many of them had become his followers. When some of the legal experts from among the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, “Why is he eating with sinners and tax collectors?”

Last week we sang a song written by David Frazier and arranged by Mark Miller that said, “I need you, you need me, we’re all a part of God’s body. Stand with me, agree with me, we’re all a part of God’s body. It is God’s will that every need be supplied. You are important to me, I need you to survive. I’ll pray for you, you pray for me, I love you, I need you to survive. I won’t harm you with words from my mouth, I love you, I need you to survive.” As we have been talking about being real with one another, we have acknowledged that there is pain in every one of our stories. And often we don’t know those stories. Not because we don’t want to know them, but because we have not made space for those stories to be shared. I was visiting with a pastor friend who serves a church in Flower Mound that is predominantly Caucasian. They have tried to be very intentional about having conversation about race this fall. One of their African American members who has been a part of the church for 20 years shared a story in worship about living in Mississippi as a child. Their family bought a new house and they arrived with all of their possessions to find that their new home had been burned to the ground overnight. He said that as a 65-year old man he could still smell the hate of that smoke. People who had been in Sunday School classes with him for years, people who had sat next to him in Chancel Choir, and thought that they knew everything about him heard that story for the first time. He had been invited to share some of the pain of his story and he was willing to trust that it would be received with open hearts. What a gift he gave everyone in the congregation by sharing the pain of his story. But what a gift the congregation gave by providing the space and establishing the trust that allowed him to feel safe to share.

There is an incredible video on youtube of a young man who decides to trust. He wears a blindfold and he wrote on a posterboard that he is an Arab American who feels scared. He wrote that he is anxious and uneasy in his own country of America because it is difficult to see what lies ahead for us as Americans. He wrote that he had hope that he was safe and that he wanted to build a community of caring, rather than one of fear. He wrote, “You can trust me to care for you no matter who you are, what you look like, or where you are from. Will you embrace me as willingly as I embrace you? Will you shake my hand and/or hug me and/or take a photo with me and post it as a sign that I am safe here with you? I trust you.”[[1]](#footnote-2) I watched the video as children and older adults and people who looked like me and people who didn’t, embraced this man. We are better together. If only we can get beyond ourselves and our fears.

I think about the families that bring their children and teenagers here Sunday mornings to learn about Jesus. They are trusting the adults that lead those classes, they are trusting Kristin Mallory, our Children and Youth Minister, who creates the Sunday morning lessons each week. They are trusting the other children that they will be kind and loving and compassionate to one another.

I think about the people who are willing to give church one more chance after being hurt. We are real, broken, hurting people. We are a real church for real people with real problems, and we realize that to love each other well we have to trust one another. I remember right after college going to Spain with my sister. We were on the subway and a woman started speaking to me in Spanish. I was so excited because I had an opportunity to practice my Spanish! But something happened as our conversation continued. The woman started responding to me in English. We had this conversation with me speaking in Spanish so I could practice and her speaking to me in English so that she could practice. Our motivation was the same, we wanted to practice the other person’s language. We all get up early on a Sunday morning because we are motivated by God’s love. God loves us so much and by coming to this place we can feel that love and feel encouraged to go into our jobs or our schools or our neighborhoods and share God’s love with everyone that we see. We all come to this place with the same motivation: to grow closer to God, to feel a part of something larger than ourselves, to make a difference in the world. We are motivated to be united in our mission to be God’s hands and feet in the world.

We are God’s hands and feet as we sing in the Chancel Choir and create powerful worship for our God. We are God’s hands and feet as we come to this place and say that we will be a people of hope. Hope never ends. We are committed to the most vulnerable in our community and in our world in places like Juarez. We love all people unconditionally. We build close ties of friendship with each other because we are a family of faith. That is the language that we speak together.

We may have already decided who the enemy is and if you are against me on an issue, then you are enemy. But there are different ways of viewing the world. As the church we are called to feel other people’s pain and acknowledge what is not right about us, and what is not right about our world. We stand with the refugee and the the immigrant. As United Methodists we want just and compassionate migration policies that affirm the worth, dignity, and inherent value and rights of all persons regardless of nationality or legal status.[[2]](#footnote-3) The General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, the Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe said “Immigrants and refugees sit in our pews and are behind the pulpit. United Methodists around the world are loving their neighbors by welcoming refugees and immigrants into their congregations and communities.” We compassionately welcome our sisters and brothers. That is what we do as the Christian Church, and that is definitely what we do as Greenland Hills United Methodist Church.

Mark Miller has a song called, “I Dream of a Church.” The lyrics say: “I dream of a church where everyone is welcome. I dream of a place we all can call home. I dream of a world where justice is flowing with hope and piece growing where God’s will is done. Make it so, make it so, help us to pray make it so. We dream of a world where love reigns among us. Your will is done, help us make it so. O God fill our hearts to reach out in welcome, make us to see your vision once more. Let’s dream of a world where our hands are your hands, we offer ourselves, O God make it so. Make it so, make it so. We pray for that day, make it so. We dream of a world where love reigns among us, your will is done, help us make it so.”

There is a story of a man who embarked on a sea voyage around the world. Partway through his journey, he encountered a terrible storm. His vessel capsized and was ripped apart, but luckily he was able to swim to a small island. After a bit of exploration, he discovered that he was the only inhabitant of the island. He also discovered that there was sufficient animal life and vegetation on the island to support his life. So, in true Gilligan's Island fashion, he built a new life for himself on that island.  Ten years passed. One day, the man was stunned to see a ship approaching the island: He was being rescued! Before long, a team of rescuers strolled onto the island, and the shipwrecked man met them on the beach.  They stated: "We are here to rescue you and the others."  The man declared, "That's fantastic! …but there are no 'others.' I am the only person on this island."  The rescuers looked confused. They said, "Sir, just ahead of us we see, not 1, but 3 buildings. How is it that you dwell on this island all alone, yet have constructed 3 different buildings?"  The man said, "I will explain. The 1st building? That is my home. That's where I eat and sleep. The 2nd building? That is my church. That's where I pray and worship."  He paused. The rescuers prompted him: "Well, then, what is the 3rd building?"  The man replied, "Oh, that's the church I used to attend, until I got mad at 'em and changed my membership…"

What kind of church do we want to be here in this place? Our scripture for today tells a story about Jesus calling one of the disciples. From Mark 2:13-16, Jesus went out beside the lake again. The whole crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he continued along, he saw Levi, Alphaeus’ son, sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Levi got up and followed him. Jesus sat down to eat at Levi’s house. Many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples. Indeed, many of them had become his followers. When some of the legal experts from among the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, “Why is he eating with sinners and tax collectors?”

The writer of Mark’s Gospel is using the term sinner to describe a class of persons who are at the social and moral bottom of the ladder. These are the bandits, and the prostitutes, and the murderers, the absolute low-life of society. Tax collectors were recruited by the Romans to collect the taxes funding the Roman Empire from their neighbors. They were given quotas and whatever they collected above their quotas they could keep. A tax collector was considered a traitor to their people and profited from the losses of their neighbors.

But what if these people are trapped? No one grows up dreaming of their dream job to extort their neighbors or sell their bodies. Jesus lives out his message of forgiveness and mercy, acceptance and grace in his eagerness to spend time with them, to eat with them, to accept their hospitality and actually be seen with them. Isn’t it interesting that it is usually only those who know they are in need who are eager for help.

There was a commentary a few years ago in the Washington Post written by Tom Ehrich entitled “Church Shouldn’t Be this Hard.” He said Church is a place that helps people. The Church is a place that is all about God’s unconditional love. And yet so often the Church is filled with hatred and fear. The Church is too willing to declare hurt people worthless, unacceptable, undesirable or strangers at the gate. We should do what Jesus did and focus outside of these walls. We will make some mistakes, and it won’t be comfortable. We are called to serve the least in our world. Speaking truth to power is difficult. Confronting our own weakness and capacity for sin is difficult. Yes, this is a human creation and we will see human brokenness in the church, but we should be working to heal that brokenness and to show better ways to live. We are flawed creatures helping each other bring our neediness to God. “Church should be a safe place — safe to be oneself, safe to make one’s confession, safe to love whoever one feels called to love, safe to imagine more, safe to fail.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

We may come to this place this morning with a broken heart in our hands. And we look around in this place and we remind ourselves that we are not alone. And we see that we can lay our burdens down, and we find that we can find redemption. We can experience God’s mercy and grace and love. We feel the Holy Spirit wash over us and we lay our burdens down before the God who gives us life abundantly and we realize that we have been found. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.arabamerica.com/arab-american-activist-posed-social-experiment-asking-strangers-trust/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://umc-gbcs.org/press-releases/social-justice-agency-of-the-united-methodist-church-stands-with-immigrants [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/commentary-church-shouldnt-be-this-hard/2014/01/07/1d869022-77c0-11e3-a647-a19deaf575b3\_story.html?utm\_term=.fe7ddbf8822d [↑](#footnote-ref-4)