

Defining Words of Faith 1: *Incarnation*

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Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And 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.’ ⁷Just 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. ⁸“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? ⁹When 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.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Priya Parker is a conflict resolution strategist and author of the acclaimed book, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters*. On the one hand, you could say the book's publication date was regrettable, because *The Art of Gathering* came out shortly before the pandemic sent us apart into varying degrees of isolation. On the other hand, you could say that the timing was perfect. Because while those long early pandemic months prohibited us from being together in groups larger than our little pods, we were given the opportunity to think about what we were missing. We were forced to no longer take for granted the importance of sharing a meal with friends, or marking big milestone events like birthday parties, the high school prom, weddings, funerals, or singing the great hymns of the church in the presence of a congregation. Sometimes it takes missing a thing to recognize its value.

So - why do we gather? Parker asks in her book. To solve problems we cannot solve on our own, to celebrate, to mourn and mark transitions. We gather to make decisions, to create things, to say goodbye and to welcome. She sums up all these reasons writing simply: We gather because we need one another. Then Parker writes about the great paradox of gathering, saying: there are so many good reasons for coming together that often we don't pay enough attention to why we do so. She says: "Convening people meaningfully requires we commit to a bold, sharp purpose."¹

Over the next couple of months, we are going to consider the bold, sharp purpose of our gathering as a Christian church, and as a Presbyterian congregation by focusing on key theological concepts that define our witness and our living the gospel of Jesus Christ. This series of sermons will focus on defining words of faith because we have a language that can help us navigate these divisive, violent, complicated, fraught and mournful times in which we live. We have a particular theological vocabulary that helps us find a spirit of unity and common purpose in the midst of our diversity. Today, we begin the series by

¹ Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters*, p. 2.

focusing on incarnation. Because if there is any word that defines the church as a community gathered it is precisely that – the Incarnation, the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ who promises to be with us whenever we come together.

British pastor and theologian, Samuel Wells, sums up the importance of the Incarnation for the church writing: “On one starry night, displaced by migration, in a hostile political climate, surrounded by animals, from an unwed mother living homeless in a strange town, God entered human existence. The Word became Flesh.” That is what is unique about the church gathered. Wells goes on to say, “There is more! God coming into human existence in Jesus is not the whole story. God wants to share our limited, fragile, earthly life. But God doesn’t simply want that – as marvelous as it is. Jesus is God stretching out a hand and saying, “Come into the essence of all things to be with me... Jesus invites us to become part of the very presence of God in all things.”² The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the primary reason the church gathers in person.

About a year ago, as we were slowly emerging from the worst of Covid’s isolation, Krista Tippett interviewed Priya Parker about what the pandemic had taught us about the art of gathering. Parker told her a story about a little church in North Carolina. A woman who had reached out for advice had said to her, “We are a church community, and we’ve been missing each other. We’ve missed each other physically during the pandemic, but also, it’s revealed all of these deep political tensions that we hadn’t faced before, and it’s been hard... it’s been tough. So, the conflict resolution specialist, Priya Parker probed the question about the bold purpose of their coming back together. What is the need? she asked. What is the core purpose for your community as you come back together? The woman responded: the need of this moment is joy. We need to remember that we want to be a community together. We don’t want to avoid the political divisions, the polarization about issues, and

² Samuel Wells, *Walk Humbly*, p. 48-49

sweep everything under the rug, but amid diverse points of view about this and about that, we need to face one another. The woman from the little church told the expert on meaningful gathering, in that moment their deepest need was to remember the joy and surprise in seeing each other again.³

What does Jesus say, at the end of his twin parables this morning, “Rejoice with me, for I have found what has been lost... and there is joy.” There is something in the heart of God that longs for the human family to be gathered together, gathered as incarnate community, gathered in person with the assurance that the Spirit of Christ is among us, and thereby to experience the joy we share in the intentional, purposeful ways that we come together.

The religious thinkers of Jesus’ day, the Pharisees and scribes did not like the way Jesus gathered diverse people together. They were grumbling about Jesus when they said, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” To which Jesus responded with a couple of little snapshots from everyday life to show how God searches for those on the margins, how God goes out of her way to restore value to anyone who may go missing. God wants – more than anything else – to gather the whole wandering, sinful, wayward, and often lost human family together in order to be in relationship with all of us.

Those gathered around Jesus know that a lost sheep, for all practical purposes, is a dead sheep. A sheep that gets away from the protection of the fold and the care of the Shepherd – is a wolf’s supper. Likewise, a lost coin is a dead asset. The woman’s coin, we are told, is silver, a drachma, the wage of one day’s earnings. Without it, she is not destitute, she still has the other nine coins, but the lost one has value nonetheless. As a matter of fact, one drachma could buy a sheep, which ties these two parables together.⁴ So the way Jesus tells it, the sheep is

³ Krista Tippett, On Being interview with Priya Parker, 9/30/2021.

⁴ John Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*.

given life, and the coin is given value, only by the Shepherd and the Woman who search for and find them, and gather them together with the others. Ours is a God, Jesus is saying, who ventures far to look for the one outside the fold; ours is a God who will turn her world upside down in order to restore value to that which has been lost. Ours is a God whose deepest desire is to restore human community with bold purpose for the sake of the world.

How did Paul say it for the Philippian church?

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete... let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

In his book on this Letter to the Philippians, my friend and pastoral colleague Tom Are writes: “The Christian life is a communal life and can’t be lived alone... Just as Jesus announced that the kingdom of God has drawn near and then immediately created a community by calling disciples, so too Paul indicates a life worthy of the gospel is a life that is shared with others. What makes a group of people a community of faith is not a set of doctrines to which everyone agrees, as important as doctrine is. The church is not defined even by a collection of mission activities, although they too are important. The church is first a network of relationships. The gospel is essentially communal... calling us to be mindful that we belong to one another.”⁵

That, my friends, is the very definition of Incarnation – a counter-cultural word and way in our day, even as it was in the time of Jesus. It takes work to remember that our unity is forged from our diversity. It takes courage to say – that sinner over there is welcomed at the table where I, also a sinner, eat, because when the two of us sit down together Jesus also pulls up a chair. It takes practice to recognize that every

⁵ Tom Are, Jr., *Joy Even on Your Worst Days*, p. 50.

human face bears the image and likeness of God. We cannot do this work, have the courage, or practice the faith alone. We need each other; we need the sheer joy of gathering together with bold purpose.

Pastor, professor and United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon remembers a man in a congregation he once served who drove an hour each way to be in church on Sunday morning. One day, the pastor asked about the reason of his making such an effort to be at their church. With characteristic good humor Willimon admitted he hoped that the man would answer, “Of course I come for the brilliant preaching.” “He didn’t.” Willimon writes, “To my dismay he said, “You know, most of your sermons are over my head. I only understand about one out of four of your sermons.” Really? Then why do you keep coming to our church? “Because,” the man answered, “almost every Sunday in the gathering of these people I meet Christ here. Somehow, somehow, through the company of those around me, Christ comes to me, speaks to me, and I go away refreshed and more committed to follow Christ.”⁶

That, my friends, is the experience of Incarnation. That is the defining word of why we gather. That is the bold purpose of being the church.

AMEN.

⁶ *Peter Stevenson & Stephen Wright, Preaching the Incarnation, P. 34*