

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 15, 2019

“Where Would You Go to Meet Jesus?”

Luke 15:1-10

I read in a church development book some time ago of the experiences of a church planter who spent a whole lot of his time in bars. Don't get me wrong, he didn't even drink. What this church planter decided right off the bat was that he would not seek out ready-made Christians (although they were welcome) but that he would go after the lost. He would go after the people that most churches avoided. This man, despite the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, welcomed sinners and ate with them.

As a result of spending time outside the church (in coffee shops, libraries, and malls, not just bars) rather than inside the church, he grew the congregation very fast. A side benefit was that he found some great musicians in the house bands that were willing to play at church on Sunday morning.

This church planter, now a consultant, pleads with other congregations to get out of their offices and seek out people who normally wouldn't be caught dead in church. This reminds me of the old story of the man who lost a coin and was out on the sidewalk on his hands and knees looking for it under the streetlamp. A friend came along and offered help, got down on his knees as well and asked him, “So where exactly did you lose this coin?”

The man with his nose still on the ground replied, “In the house.” “Then why are you looking for it out here?”

“That's a silly question. The light is better out here.”

Isn't this what happens too often in church? We build and adore our nice buildings, we pastors stock our libraries with all the books we could ever need to prepare our sermons, and we create work for ourselves that keeps us coming back to our buildings where the light is better. All the while, the ones who are lost are outside and we never see them unless they rudely interrupt us with a request for food or utility assistance or for advice while going through a life-changing event. We too often expect the lost to be attracted by our buildings and our manicured grounds, by our flashy websites, or our latest direct mail of the newsletter, promising a splendid preaching worship, but we don't spend enough time with them to see if this is what they are looking for or what they in fact need. They may be looking for Jesus only to have us offer them a potluck dinner. So they stay lost. Or, and I must say this, perhaps it is we ourselves who are lost.

What would happen to our church if we focused on those outside these walls rather than on making sure that each of us received exactly what we wanted from church? What would happen if the church stopped being about us? What would happen if we focused our attention on the lost and neglected of the world instead of what color to paint our eaves?

Our bishop recently encouraged us to imagine the church and the world switching places. She wanted us to picture our churches being in the world and the world being in our churches. I found that intriguing even if I don't exactly know how far to stretch the image. But then it's not unlike how we understand the ministry of the greeters who stand at the doors at the church and, turning toward us and show us the world, and turning toward the world, showing the world the church.

Over the past several decades it has become fashionable to survey neighborhoods to find out the needs and wants of the people who live there before actually developing a new church. The church would then be designed around what the majority of the people in that area wanted. One such church plant took that method a bit far in my opinion when they offered a class to parents on how to potty train their toddler. I am not kidding. As they say, you can't make that stuff up.

How different this is from the approaches I've already mentioned. When we design churches around what people think they need we may never get to the mission of Christ. Instead. We'll be putting on potty training seminars instead of ones on how to reach the unchurched in our families and neighborhoods. We will be focused so much on the needs of the dwindling number of people already in the building that we will not have energy left to open our doors to the world and go out to the highways and byways, the coffee shops and the chopping malls, and invite those outside our church walls.

A friend of mine built a wonderful church from the ground up by going door-to-door and building relationships with literally thousands of people in the area where their new church was being planted. As a result, the church grew very fast and became a successful church in just a few years. Yet within about eleven years the grumbling became so loud that the board of the church asked him to consider leaving since he wasn't spending enough time with the established members of the church but was out in the streets still bringing new people to Christ. I wonder what they expected from their new pastor.

Now I realize that this might not be exactly the kind of message you came looking for this morning. I understand that, I really do. I have a hard time going to places where I might need to step out of my comfort zone like I'm suggesting

we do. I, too, wish there was a church where my every need was met. But to be honest, a church like that would give me the willies.

So instead, let's step out together. Let's stand alongside our greeters who week after week stand at our church doors and welcome the world in and welcome us out into the world as disciples of Christ. Let us stand and walk with those who leave this comfortable setting and seek out those whom the world has forgotten. Let us do what we're called to do to go and find the lost. Let us do what Jesus did up until and after the time of his death on the cross, and despite the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes among us, welcome sinners and eat with them.