

We Are the Disciples Sermon Series
#2 – Wholeness
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“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.” That is the identity statement of our denomination, which we are exploring in this sermon series. We’re trying to figure out what this means and who we are, as individuals and as a congregation, in light of this statement. Last week we look at the word “movement” and came to a few conclusions: (1) to be a part of a movement you have to be moving, and (2) a movement is purposeful, it has a goal toward which it is moving.

For us as Christians, as members of Crestwood, and as a part of the Disciples of Christ denomination, the goal of our movement is simple: to make the Kingdom of God real here on earth. The identity statement articulates that goal by calling us a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, so today we’re going to spend some time on the idea of “wholeness.” I always laugh when I think about this word, because it was quite the buzzword for Disciples leaders when this statement came out. In fact, a few years ago at our national gathering, the word was said so much from the main stage that some of us considered turning it into a drinking game. Every time someone says “wholeness,” we would take a swig from...our communion cup, of course. What did you think we were drinking?!?

A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. If this is our goal as a denomination, what does that mean? What’s the difference between fragmentation and wholeness? My original training was as a journalist, and in that time I developed both a love for language and a stubbornness for its correct use. I admit I’m a card-carrying member of the grammar police. Most people have their favorite sports team or restaurant; I have my favorite punctuation mark (the semicolon). When I’m driving and I see a sign that says “Homegrown apple’s for sale,” with “apples” spelled “a-p-p-l-e-’-s” I about run off the road. Not only that, but punctuation can save lives. For example, a simple comma is the difference between, “Let’s eat, Grandma” and “Let’s eat Grandma!”

The punctuation you choose is important, because it can be symbolic. Think about the difference between a hyphen and a slash. A hyphen connects two words or concepts together, like Judeo-Christian or Italian-American. Even married folks looking to hold onto both aspects of their identity while embodying their new connection do so by hyphenating their names. The verbal symbol for a hyphen is “and,” as in Italian and American.

The slash, however, serves the opposite function. It seeks to divide two words or concepts, severing the connection between them. The verbal symbol for the slash is “or.” Male-slash-female. Yes-slash-no. The slash divides, forcing you to make a choice between what’s on one side of the slash and what’s on the other side. You can’t have both, the slash says. There’s no connection here.

So to reword our identity statement in light of this punctuation lesson, we are called to be a movement for hyphens in a slash-filled world. We are called to help reconnect that which the world has severed. And don’t we have our work cut out for us? If I were to ask you to name some of the places where the world was fragmented, you’d never stop. Wars, broken relationships, violence in our communities, tension between governments, tension within

governments, animosity between people of different faiths, lack of civility on social and political issues, differing beliefs about how to best care for each other. We live in a slash-filled world.

What, then, should be our goal as a movement for wholeness? What does wholeness in the kingdom of God look like? We start to answer that question by turning to scripture, where a vision of God's kingdom is spelled out in numerous places. I think of Isaiah 2, which says that in God's kingdom, God will settle disputes and those in conflict will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. I think of Isaiah 65, which says that in God's kingdom, the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more. Everyone will live out their lives to the fullest, the wolf and the lamb will feed together, and no one will harm or destroy. I think of Jesus praying to God on our behalf that we may all be one together, not a bunch of individual ones. Jesus says the kingdom of God for which we are working is a place where lost coins are found and lost sheep are pursued and lost children are welcomed home. He says the kingdom of God is a place characterized by the innocence of little children, where sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes are all invited to eat at the great banquet table, to satisfy themselves with God's overflowing abundance of goodness. This is what the Bible says the kingdom of God looks like.

Are we there yet? Sometimes it feels like we haven't even taken the first step on this journey. Sometimes it feels like we're going in the opposite direction, like we're beating pruning hooks into spears and plowshares into swords, ready to harm and destroy with hateful words and destructive actions. Instead of the innocence of children, we live with the hardened cynicism of people whose trust has been betrayed so much that we don't even know how to look at someone without emphasizing the ways they are different from us. We lead with the slash instead of the hyphen, forgoing the possibility of connection by prioritizing self-preservation.

I wonder if that's what happened to our denomination as a whole. Right after we chose to become a denomination in 1968, institutions began losing authority and influence. For this new institution called the Disciples, that loss was manifested in shrinking attendance and giving. And when it starts getting smaller, an institution will turn inward to maintain its internal structure and identity. But not a movement. A movement is passionate about going beyond itself to make a difference in the world around it, to connect itself with the movement of God, like a small tributary flowing into a mighty river. That's a question we as a church have to wrestle with, not just theologically but practically. We have to wrestle with the basic need to sustain ourselves versus the call to embody God's love and grace beyond ourselves. In other words, as a movement for wholeness, we have to balance keeping the lights on with being a light to the world.

To work for wholeness, I believe we also have to recognize that wholeness starts with each one of us. Our own lives can become so fragmented with busy schedules – slash – financial challenges – slash – relationship breakdowns that we easily become separated from God, our source of strength and hope and connection. So the move toward wholeness starts with us, as we seek to live with patience and grace and openness to others, and then radiates out from there.

Wholeness for the world starts within us, then continues in how we relate to others. Wholeness means recognizing the person on the other side of the aisle or the other end of an argument is a whole person, not defined only by what they believe or how they live. Seeking wholeness means beginning conversations with the assumption that the other person is a child of God just like us, rather than seeing them as an adversary on the “wrong” side of an issue or as a stranger with different skin, clothes, and beliefs. To move for wholeness means seeking common ground, not a place to draw a line in the sand. That starts with each one of us. And if we each

strive for this in our own lives, we're going to look an awful lot like a movement that is changing the world.

We may not be able to personally erase the slashes that have been drawn in our country and in our world, but we can still make a difference. Our efforts to draw a hyphen between ourselves and other Christians, between ourselves and people of other faiths, and between ourselves and people of no faith may mean the difference between someone knowing they are loved by God and hating God because people have told them that God hates them. And that lack of love leads to acts of hatred, acts of violence, acts of fragmentation. That person you seek to connect with today could be tomorrow's addict, tomorrow's abuser, tomorrow's news headline. It may be your connection that makes all the difference.

A movement for wholeness. Another word for "wholeness" is "shalom," the Jewish word which means a sense of peace, completeness, and harmony. A synonym I like for "wholeness" is "unity." Now, that word is often confused with "uniformity," but they mean different things. To seek unity is to seek connection in the midst of our diversity, to recognize that there is so much more that hyphens us together than slashes us apart. To move toward unity means forging relationships at the personal, congregational, and institutional level with those who are different from us as a way to model to this fragmented world of ours that we were created to be together, not apart.

Ps. 133 says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." God is not in the slash. May we seek to be hyphenated people, connected to those like us and unlike us through our mutual respect and love, working for the well-being and provision of all God's people, inviting everyone to God's banquet table. That's what the Kingdom of God looks like. What's the next step we can take in our lives to make that happen? What hyphen can we draw today, not with someone who already looks and thinks like us, but with someone who has previously been slashed apart from us? A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. Changing the world starts with us.