

The Kin-dom of God Sermon Series
A Movement for Wholeness...
July 30, 2023
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As many of you know, Crestwood is part of a denomination called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the oldest American-born denomination that was started right here in Lexington in 1932. Yesterday, just down the road in Louisville, our denomination's national gathering, the General Assembly, kicked off and we welcomed our brothers and sisters to Kentucky by giving them bourbon for communion. Just kidding, we used grape juice. It's good to be together again as a church family.

The theme this year is "The Kin-dom of God, Within us, Among us." These last few weeks, we've been looking at some scripture that helps us understand what it means to be a kin-dom, a more inclusive and egalitarian term than "kingdom." Today, I want to look at our denomination's identity statement, which says, "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."

The challenge with such a statement is putting it into action, getting buy-in from the individual congregations that make up this denomination. Because we are not governed in a top-down, hierarchical format, we don't have a Pope or a Bishop who can say, "Here, take this statement, this is who we are, no arguments." Each congregation is responsible for interpreting and living out the statement in their own context. What does it mean for Crestwood to claim this identity? Let's figure that out by breaking it down into four key words: movement, wholeness, table, and welcome.

Is the Disciples of Christ a movement? Is Crestwood a movement? Initially, I'd answer "no" to both those questions. When I think of a movement, I think of a loosely organized, somewhat unstructured collection of people who shared beliefs and come together to achieve common goals. The second part of that sentence fits: we share beliefs and we seek to live out those beliefs in common ways. But are we loosely organized and unstructured? If you think so, I have a couple Administrative Board committee sub-groups I'd like you to serve on.

That's ironic, because when we first started as a denomination, we were exactly a movement, moving against the splintering factions and exclusionist leadership that ruled churches in that day. So, how can we recapture that fluid core of who we are as Disciples of Christ? It starts with remembering what the Bible says. Have you ever noticed how often someone in the Bible is told to move? God comes to Abraham and says, "Go!" Abraham says, "Where?" And God says, "Don't worry about it, I've got it covered." God comes to Moses and says, "Go!" Moses says, "Where?" And God says, "I'll tell ya, but you're not going to like it." So Moses heads off to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh. And after his resurrection, as he's about to ascend to Heaven, Jesus says to his disciples (and us), "Go! Make disciples of all nations."

Do you see the pattern here? To be a believer in God means to be moving. I've said before that we are not called the Standers Still of Christ or the Loiters of Christ; we are the Followers of Christ, and that statement implies movement. What's the opposite of movement? Stagnation. Stuckness. Complacency. I don't remember a passage where God says, "Steve, stand still! Don't move! Don't do anything!" The Bible is full of calls to go, to move, to leave, to seek, to follow, to live out faith through action.

But not all movement is the same. God doesn't call Moses to walk in circles around the burning bush; that's movement, but it has no purpose. Instead, when people in the Bible are called to move, they are called to move toward something. That brings us to our second word. We are a "movement for wholeness." What, then, should be our goal as a movement for wholeness? What does wholeness in the kin-dom of God look like?

We answer that question by turning once again to scripture, where a vision of God's kin-dom is spelled out in numerous places. I think of Isaiah 2, which says that in God's kin-dom, 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 kin-dom, 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' many parables that start off with, "The kin-dom of God is like," and then go on to talk about a mustard seed which grows to provide shelter for many, and a bit of yeast which causes a whole loaf of bread to rise. He says the kin-dom of God is a place where lost coins are found and lost sheep are pursued and lost children are welcomed home. He says the kin-dom 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 kin-dom of God looks like, and that is wholeness for which we are to strive, one interaction and one conversation and one show of love at a time. This is not about dogma or doctrine; this is about helping make other people whole. If we're doing something other than providing welcome and working for peace, we're working against the kin-dom of God.

For us as Disciples one of the main places we experience being made whole is at the table, our third word. Obviously, the table is fairly important to us. We didn't just put this piece of furniture here because we needed a place to set our candles. There's a reason the table is literally central to our worship experience. Someone once said that a Disciples of Christ worship without communion is like taking a shower without turning on the water. I'm in charge of providing communion for our General Assembly worship services, so the last few weeks I've had 10,000 communion cups in my office, each of which will be used to provide a worshipper with a tangible reminder of God's gift of Jesus Christ.

There's something sacred about sharing a meal together, isn't there? We often talk about eating with someone as breaking bread together. In fact, the word "companion" literally means "to share bread with." When we eat together, we are not just a group of individuals gathered at a table; through the act of sharing space and nourishment, we are companions, sharing in the gift of love and grace given to us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

That's what this table does. It takes the complex divisions our world has created and breaks them down into their simplest form – one human sharing a meal with another human. That's why we pass the trays. Don't look now, but you may be sitting next to someone you just don't like. I said don't look! But when they hand you a tray of bread and a tray of communion and share this meal with you, the two of you become companions, whether you choose to live that way or not. It's one thing to think critically of people whose behaviors or beliefs or Facebook posts are so different than ours. It's quite another thing to share a meal with Carlos or Stephanie or Ihsan, to hear about their struggles and their families and their faith, to put a face and a name and a story on our points of division. Through sharing a meal, our enemies – real or perceived – can become our companions.

But before we can break bread with them, they have to know they are welcomed, which is our fourth word. Notice, it's the only significant word that is said twice, as it brackets and informs our understanding of the table. And it's the only action verb, the only thing we're called to do in our statement: to welcome others as God has welcomed us. The other words say who we are, but this one says what we do.

Why do we do welcome others to the table? Is our motivation to get people to join our church? Notice, the Identity Statement doesn't say, "As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table so that we can hand them a pledge card and sign them up for a ministry team." Hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church members. It's not about meeting institutional goals. As the Identity Statement says, we welcome because we have first been welcomed. It doesn't say what's supposed to happen as a result of our welcome; that part is up to God. All we are called to do is let people know they are welcome.

But we are only getting half the picture if we believe that we are the only ones with something to offer when we welcome others. When we join together at the table, making room for the guests among us, we not only offer them a blessing, but we open ourselves to be blessed by them. I want you to think of your favorite person in this church, the person who has made a real impact on your life. Now, realize that at one time or another, that person was a first-time guest. How would this church be different if they didn't feel welcomed here and decided not to come back? The next person who visits us may be a messenger from God, sent here to have a tremendous impact on Crestwood, and we are called to make sure they know they are welcome here. Yes, our church has something to offer guests, but I believe guests have something to offer us, as well.

We make room at the table for them because God has made room at the table for us. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said, "Hospitality is the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place." Some of our guests may come only once. Some may visit while they are passing through. Some may decide Crestwood isn't the right fit for them. Doesn't matter. Our job is to create the space and trust the Spirit of God to do the rest. Our responsibility is simple: We welcome all because God has welcomed us.

Who are we? "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." We are on the move, seeking to make connections with others as we welcome them as companions and share a life-giving meal with them, honoring their intrinsic value as children of God. As a denomination, as a church, as individuals, is this us? Can we be a movement for God's kingdom in this fragmented world? Can we throw open our arms in welcome, becoming companions with others as we make space for them? This is who we are called to be.