

We Are the Disciples sermon series  
A Movement for Wholeness...  
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Some of you all know that I love puzzles. There's something both exhilarating and soothing about knowing that what starts out as a jumbled mess will ultimately all come together to form a complete, comprehensive whole. My biggest puzzle challenge every was a 2000-piece monstrosity featuring some of the most famous and iconic buildings in the world: the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, Crestwood Christian Church. I drew that one in myself with a Sharpie. The process was painstakingly slow, but with persistence over the course of about a month, I was able to bring together this epic challenge from 2000 individual pieces to a completed picture.

Well, almost. Imagine all the emotions that I went through when I got the very end and realized there was one piece missing. One piece out of 2000. I checked the table. I checked the floor. I checked the puzzle box. I checked the vacuum cleaner. I checked the local landfill where my trash was taken. OK, not really, but that was a realistic possibility. I finally had to resign myself to the fact that this puzzle would have to remain unfinished.

That feels a lot like my day job. Every day, ministry presents puzzles that don't have solutions. You can't solve cancer or divorce or a sense of purposelessness. There's nothing I can say in the hospital room or the funeral home that's going to fix the problem or explain away the questions that don't have answers. I think I like to work crossword puzzles and do Wordles so much because I know, at the end of the day, there IS a solution. Unlike life.

That speaks to the bigger challenge of being a Christian. So much of this world feels like a puzzle with several pieces missing. We are called to be followers of Christ in this world, helping to embody the love and grace we have received from God, giving a glimpse, no matter how fleeting or incomplete, of what the kin-dom of God looks like. It's a worthy call, but one for which we seem woefully inadequate. How do we speak wholeness into a world fragmented into 2000 pieces by war, violence, racism, hatred, and, maybe worst of all, religion?

That's the challenge we're giving by our denomination's identity statement. In this sermon series, we've been learning about the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) by exploring more deeply some of our foundational statements, like "Unity is our polar star" and "Christians only but not the only Christians." To conclude the series today, we're talking about our current Identity Statement, written in 2006 by a group of leaders called the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vision Team. Here's the statement: "We are the 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."

A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. A search for the missing puzzle pieces that will complete the picture of God's kin-dom. This fits perfectly with the vision of our founders, who saw this group of believers, not as a concrete institution set in its boundaries and beliefs, but as a fluid group of followers with porous margins that welcomed people IN rather than keeping them out. Even when we restructured into a mainline denomination in 1968, we did so with unity, mission, and God's vision of justice and shalom as the polar stars that guide us.

That word "shalom" is a fascinating one. It's a Hebrew term that translates as "peace" in English, but that doesn't quite capture the robustness of the term. We think of peace as "absence of conflict," which is an indictment on the violent and conflicted nature of our world today. But "shalom" is so much more than cease-fires and unclenched fists. It means a sense of harmony, of

mutuality, of shared commitment to each other's well-being and the well-being of God's creation. Author Jamie Arpin-Ricci writes this: "Shalom is what love looks like in the flesh. The embodiment of love in the context of a broken creation, shalom is a hint at what was, what should be, and what will one day be again. Where sin disintegrates and isolates, shalom brings together and restores. Where fear and shame throw up walls and put on masks, shalom breaks down barriers and frees us from the pretense of our false selves." Shalom is the picture we see when we complete the puzzle.

So, our call as Disciples of Christ is to constantly be moving toward wholeness, working toward shalom in our souls, in our families, in our communities, in this world. This is not a call to be comfortable or complacent or spiritually satiated. We don't have faith just to feel better, although that can be a benefit of a life of faith. We are called, as Jesus tells us in Matthew, to go and make disciples of all nations. When we call on the name of Jesus Christ, we join the worldly movement of followers constantly seeking unity and justice and shalom with the same fervency of a person looking for the last piece of a 2000-piece puzzle. Trust me, that's a LOT of fervency.

But because we're human, our pursuit of shalom can easily disintegrate into a desire for everyone to believe like us, or a quest to fulfill personal agendas through activism, or a feeling of helplessness in the face of what seem like insurmountable problems. We need something to ground us, to anchor us, to remind us of who we are and WHAT we believe WHY we believe so we don't lose hope on our quest for wholeness.

Welcome to the second part of our identity statement: "As a part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's table as God has welcomed us." I heard one person describe the table as "the center of gravity" for Disciples of Christ. A center of gravity is defined as "the average location of the weight of an object." The higher your center of gravity, the easier it is to knock you over. As a 6' 3" high schooler playing football, I learned this lesson over and over and over again. The lower your center of gravity, the more grounded you are.

Our communion table is grounded. Not literally, mind you. It moves, it comes apart, it breaks down. A church I served in seminary had a huge granite communion table that I assumed weighed about a million pounds. During a children's time, I gathered all the kids around the table and we tried to lift it to show how God's love is unmoveable. Well, I didn't know that while the base of the table was grounded, the top wasn't connected, so as we all lifted the table, it shifted and all the communion trays began sliding toward the end. I hollered "Stop! Stop!" just before the body and blood of Christ spilled all over the sanctuary carpet. For some reason, my church key didn't work in the lock the following week.

This table is grounded by what it symbolizes for us: the love and grace of God poured out through the sacrifice of Christ. This table offers what this world so desperately needs, a reminder that we are united so much more than divided, we are bound together by our common humanity well before we are separated by the non-essentials of faith and politics and social issues. As the statement says, this table reminds us we are part of one body, connected by the spiritual tendons and ligaments of faith as embodied by Jesus Christ, who calls us to love God, to love our neighbor, to love our enemies. No qualifications, no caveats, no disclaimers.

I find that it's a lot easier to pursue this call to love someone when we're at a table together. There's something sacred about sharing a meal, 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. But we have to be mindful about how we approach the table.

I sat down to lunch with someone recently. We were at a table that sat four people, one on each side, and when I sat down, I sat across from the person so we could have a conversation. But she stopped me and said, "Please sit here," motioning to the sit beside her instead of the one across from her. When I asked her why, she said, "When you sit across from someone, you are putting something in between you, which creates distance and separation. But when you sit next to someone, you are creating connection and open communication."

When we come to the table, grounded in God's love and grace for us, we are called to do so with a spirit of welcome toward others, sitting beside them on their journey. "Welcome" is used twice in our Identity Statement, and it's the only action verb. "Movement" and "wholeness" are who we are, but "welcome" is what we do, inviting people to experience the blessings of being companions at the table, where we experience shalom: "What love looks like in the flesh."

This statement is ambitious. It is challenging. It speaks to both who we are and who we're called to be, encouraging us to live into God's vision of us as people and as a church. It's work that will never be finished, at least not until God's kin-dom is fully realized on earth. Until that happens, we are called to be a movement for wholeness which, as my colleague Rev. Melanie Harrell Delaney said, "seeks out every last and missing piece of the puzzle in order to complete the picture." We are not all the same shape, size, or color. We have different families and experiences and interpretations of God's will for us. We are distinct and peculiar and unique. And yet, we fit together. And when we do, we create a beautiful picture of what God intended for this world, the shalom that is knit into our spiritual DNA.

You fit here. And so do others who don't fit in other places. Our call as Disciples is to create a place of welcome where everyone can experience the gifts of the Lord's table, finding their place in this movement that seeks wholeness in a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented. Can we do that? Can we be those people, can Crestwood Christian Church be that place? Sometimes, when I look around at this world, it feels utterly impossible. And then I remember the words the angel spoke to Mary as she processed her call similar to ours, a call to bear Christ into this world: "Nothing is impossible with God."