

Last week Pastor Gina kicked off our Bless series with a powerful sermon about how we, keeping Christ at the core, reach out to the margins of the community to share God's love and bless people through the blessings Christ has given us. I don't know about you but the part of her sermon that talked about the various needs of people who live within one mile of the church was very convicting for me and something I thought about a lot this week, especially as I went for my walks and prayed for the people in the homes as I passed by them.

As I was thinking about people on the margins, I kept going back to a couple of powerful stories I have experienced as a pastor. The first happened years and years ago when one of my boys was in preschool. There was a mom at the preschool who, to put it kindly, was a little rough around the edges. She was covered from her neck down with tattoos. She had more piercings than I could count and that is just what was visible to me. Her hair changed from one wild color to another on a frequent basis. As our sons became friends, (SLIDE) she opened up to me about her life story. She was still in her teens, was a single mom who had been cut off from her parents. She was a recovering addict and she had no support. None. At all. I asked her if she had considered joining a faith community and receiving the help of a church. From October to Christmas I tried to tell her about the love of Jesus, I invited her to church, I offered support

through the church. You can imagine how happy I was then when, on Christmas Eve, she walked through the doors of the church and found a seat in the back with her son. (Black Screen)

Now, let me be clear. She did not dress how I would dress. She did not wear her hair or make up in a way that I would be comfortable. But, she came to church for the first time ever.

As worship was starting I saw, lets call her Veronica, walk in and walk down the aisle. Veronica stopped where this mom was sitting and I could see them have a back and forth conversation. Then I saw the mom scoot down to the center of the pew. A few minutes later, I saw the mom turn bright red. A few minutes after that I saw the mom start crying. Long before the Christ candle was shared and silent night was sung, I saw the mom get her son and walk out.

When school resumed I asked what had happened. She shared that Veronica came up to her and said "you are sitting in my seat". "Pastor Jessica" the mom said, "I didn't know it was her seat". I started to assure her it wasn't her fault but she cut me off. The mom continued to tell me that Veronica made snide comments about her dress, her scent, the way her son was behaving, and that it was just too much to stay.

My friends, within a year, this mom, finding solidarity and support not at church but among her addicted “friends”, started using again and lost custody of her child. I have no idea what happened to her from that point on but I have to wonder if her story could have been different.

I made the difficult decision to share what happened with the leadership of the church and the leaders and the church decided to address the issues head on. In this same church, fast forward a couple of years, I am in a McDonalds with my slightly older kids and I see a mom and dad sitting in a booth crying. I, feeling compelled by the Spirit, walk up to them, tell them I am a pastor and ask if I can pray for them. I end up hearing their story. Sylvia and Corey were both living in poverty and they had just given birth to their first child who was born very premature and was not doing well with his physical health. They had no insurance and their job and housing situation was not very secure. They were not married and had almost no support. I offered to go to the hospital and visit the baby and invited them to church. Sylvia and Corey started coming to church from that day forward. The entire church took them in. When they decided to get married (SLIDE), the church threw them a wedding, everyone showed up to celebrate their day, made a cake, helped buy a dress, and threw a reception for them. The church walked with Sylvia and supported her as she went back to

school and receive a degree in Social Work. They helped with housing, job training, and childcare. The church accepted them for who they were, as they were and it made all the difference. Today (SLIDE) Sylvia and Corey have two beautiful boys, a stable job and housing situation, and are leaders in the congregation.

Now think about these two scenarios and ask yourself the age-old question of what would Jesus do? In our Gospel lesson this morning we hear a powerful story of a woman caught in adultery. (SLIDE) She has literally been caught in an act of such sin and shame and disgrace that the law would have her punished by being stoned to death. And this is in the community in which she most likely lived so as the crowd gathers, she is seeing the people she sees at the well and at the market, the people she sees at the synagogue and community events. And in this moment, the worst moment of her life, where her very life is on the line, you can almost hear the crowd whispering, you can almost feel the stares of condemnation. But Jesus responds with grace. He doesn't excuse her, he doesn't deny that she has done something wrong, but he sees her as a hurting woman in need of divine grace and love. And isn't that what we all want and need? Don't we all want a place that will love us, even in the worst moments of our life? Don't we all want a place that will remind us that we are God's beloved creation? I

know that is what I want and more importantly, that is what I want the church to be for the world.

Now, knowing what I want the church to be, I need to speak a hard truth with you all because more often than not, people perceive the church to be full of people like the Veronica story and not the Sylvia story.

David Kinnaman, (SLIDE) in the book Unchristian, surveys people between the ages of 18 to 30 and discovers that the three primary words this age group uses to describe the Christian church are: Judgmental, hypocritical and ant-gay. Let me say that again. The most common words 18-30 year old's used to describe the Church of Jesus Christ are: Judgmental, hypocritical, and against a marginalized group of people. (BLACK)

Now, I hear that report and I immediately go into defense mode because that is not how I have experienced church. I have seen the Sylvia stories of radical mission and ministry. I have known how congregations have cared for one another through cancer treatments. I have seen how churches have been incredibly generous in times of crisis. I have seen the good, the great work churches do to glorify God and shine the light of Christ. At the same time, we have a perception problem in the world of unchurched people. We are fighting against stories of national sexual abuse and scandals and experiences of people

hearing a word of hate from pulpits rather than words of love and grace and forgiveness and redemption. And don't even get me started about how the church is portrayed in pop culture. Top it all off, we are fighting against too many grace blocking Veronica like experiences that have left marginalized people questioning their welcome in faith communities.

We live in an area where 33% of the population is considered a "none" (SLIDE) meaning no religious affiliation at all. They are not Christian, or Jewish, or Hindu, or anything. They have no affiliation with a religious community at all. 33%. There are approximately 20,000 people in a 5-mile radius and, if my math is correct, that means 6,600 people fall into this category. How might God be inviting us to bless these "nones"

On top of the none's what is even more distressing for me is the number of people who identify as Christian, so they report to be Catholic or Methodist or Baptist or you name it, but they do not ever attend a church service (SLIDE). They are Christian but do not worship in a faith community. Research indicates that for our 5-mile area 67.9% of self-professed Christians are not involved in a religious community.

That means 7 out of every 10 houses surrounding this building do not have a safe space to hear they are God's beloved child. Or wrestle with questions about faith,

or life or why bad things happen to good people, or what happens when we die, or what is the point of all this. It means that when you look down your street 7 out of 10 houses don't have a community of faith to pray for them when they face difficulty. Or have small groups they can rely on. Or have teachers to help their kids understand what it means to be a Christian.

So what are we to do with these nones and non attenders?

First, (SLIDE) we continue to create a culture of radical hospitality for all people.

We recognize that everyone is in need of God's grace and that God can use people we might not expect. Let us not forget; Noah got DRUNK. Abraham was too OLD. Jacob was a LIAR. Gideon was AFRAID. Rahab was A PROSTITUTE.

Jeremiah and Timothy were considered TOO YOUNG. David had an AFFAIR. Moses was a MURDERER. Elijah was SUICIDAL. Jonah RAN FROM GOD. Peter DENIED CHRIST. The Disciples FELL ASLEEP while PRAYING. The Samaritan Woman WAS DIVORCED five times. Timothy had AN ULCER. John the Baptist ATE BUGS. And Lazarus WAS DEAD! Yet God called them beloved children and used them to further the kingdom of God on earth.

First UMC-I have seen how you have worked to create a safe and inviting space for all of God's messy and imperfect people to come and receive love. So, how

might we continue to dig deeper in our welcoming all and create a space where people can really wrestle with and explore the Christian faith? (BLACK)

Secondly, we learn how to talk about our faith in a confident way. If we are going to reach the 7 unchurched homes on our street, we need to be able to name for ourselves and tell others about how blessed we are to be active Christians and a part of this faith community. We acknowledge that we have been deeply blessed by God not for our own benefit but so that we can go into the mission field and be a blessing for others.

(SLIDE) Madeleine L'Engle said it this way "We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it."

My friends the same research that I have been studying for TUG indicates that people in our community, churched and unchurched, are deeply concerned about the future, they are deeply worried about finances, and they want to hear a word of hope. My friends, we are the keepers of very Good News. We are the storytellers of God's hope for a hurting world. We are the ones called to be God's love in action. We need to be able to confidently and lovingly share our faith.

And finally, in order for us to see one another through God's eyes, and in order for us to talk confidently about our faith, we must continue to grow in our knowledge and love of Christ for ourselves. Like the woman of our Gospel passage, we have all fallen short of the glory of God. We have all needed and received the grace, forgiveness, and friendship of Jesus. And what a blessing to know that, appreciate that, and proclaim that with our lives. And friends we are blessed to be a blessing. To fully unpack and live that we must continually receive the love of Christ again and again(SLIDE). We must continually hear the words of life and forgiveness over and over again. We must go and love our neighbor in fresh new ways by being in ministry with the ungracious and unloved, the sick and the healthy, the poor and the rich, and each and every person in our path because each one is a beloved child of God. So Church-let's be resolved to continue to reach out to the Veronica's and Sylvia's of this world and show them the light God gives us and be for others the type of friend that we find in Jesus . May it be so.

Amen and Amen.