Springfield Presbyterian Church

January 17th, 2021

Second/Third Sunday After Epiphany

The Outsiders

1. Freshman

The Outsiders was one of the first books that we read in my Freshman English Class in High School. I probably remember the timing so well, because the idea of being an outsider was one that I felt prominently at that time. No, I wasn’t a Greaser like Ponyboy or Sodapop or Johnny, but I just transferred into a large public school from a small private school. My graduating class in middle school had 25 youth, but in the high school, I would end up graduating with just over 300 people. In those days, especially in the beginning as I struggled to open my locker, I felt the keen awareness that I was a little bit different and I didn’t have a friend amongst classmates.

So, I did what any young teenager seeks to do – I sought to fit in. I did not end up with the Socialites, but I ended up with the kids that would probably be the modern-day Greasers of Point Boro High. My friends would be the ones who ended up getting in trouble – they smoked weed before it was legalized, they probably smoked other things I have kept out of my memory, and they drank and they offered it all to me as a youth. The amazing thing about the off-beat group was that unlike the Socialites, or the popular kids, they accepted me for who I was, not who they wanted me to be. They didn’t peer pressure me, and would occasionally tease me, but it was teasing between friends.

The popular kids, I imagine, probably assumed I did drugs and/or drank and got up to mischief, but that was a creation in their own heads. I had the privilege of belonging to the outsiders and being loved without questions about what brands of clothing I was wearing or how excellent my beach tan was from the summer before. I didn’t have anything to prove, and in High School, I made my home among the outsiders.

They even loved me when they knew I loved Jesus. I didn’t try to convert them, but I would abstain from drugs or alcohol because of my Christian faith. I didn’t judge them, so

they didn’t judge me. The popular kids did, but amongst the outsiders – you could be anything you wanted to be.

After High School, we all parted ways. Most stayed in town, one unfortunately, ended up in prison, others went off to college like myself. We didn’t talk again, just because we grew older and hopefully a bit wiser – but I was grateful for them, for the acceptance I felt, and I continually remember that phase of life as one that taught me that the fringes is where life happens.

I love in this text when someone says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” As it so happens – yes – good comes from the places we do not expected it. In Jesus’ day, it was towns like Nazareth, or small fishing communities where he would call upon disciples. It was not the most elite places, with the most clever people, with the most amount of money – that’s not where Jesus does a majority of his ministry. And as for us, we find that yes, ministry can happen on the floors of Wall Street or the Upper East Side of Manhattan, but the stories I’ve been most moved by of discipleship have come from places unexpected. When I worked in West Philadelphia, I met people who would be considered outsiders not only from the city, but from society. I met people who were generous, loving, and caring – and while there were some curse words often thrown into conversation – these people across the span of my ministry there reminded me to go and look at the fringes. The fringes of society know what if feels like not to be loved, they know what it means to not be valued – and while some are bitter, some will sway directly in the other direction, seeking to love and value all.

In other ministries, my greatest call to discipleship was found amongst again the unexpected. Those folks who were struggling to pay the rent or find money for utilities – and they would give the dollars from their pocket in service to Christ. I remember one individual in particular that I said – please, if it’s too tough right now, I don’t want you to feel like you have to give and they responded, totally showing up, by saying. “I don’t feel like I have to, I feel called to” and they placed the money in the offering envelope.

1. Called to More

What I have learned about being a High School outsider and what I have learned from serving from the sense that God calls us to the fringes, is that so much beautiful work and discipleship happens from those places. In the text today, the discipleship situation isn’t one that is super built up – there isn’t a big sweeping act of thunder and applause. The call is more of an invitation, and a simple one at that, “Follow me. Come and See.” Come and see what can be, come and see what the prophets were all talking about, come and see what radical love can do.

And the two men follow Jesus. They do not say – let me think about it, can we have a theological dialogue about the implications of this discipleship, or let me make a pro and con list in my house and get right back to you. No, they trust the Holy Spirit, and they follow, without further questioning, to see the adventure that Christ will take them on, an adventure of discipleship that I would imagine is much bigger than they could have ever dreamt.

1. Welcome to the Fringes

And so my call is similar to the one that Jesus offers today to these two outsiders – but instead of saying, Follow me – I say – Follow Him. Come and see. Come and see what it looks like to live on the fringes, to walk with those who do not come from your hometown, and see what radical love can do. Come and see what it means to put yourself in an uncomfortable position, to speak the words of truth and goodness that often grate against attitudes of society. Come and see what it means to openly follow Jesus, to be loving and unapologetic about it, and to show the world that there are Christ-followers who are really seeking to emulate Christ in how they act, in what they do, and in what they say.

How will you follow Christ? Well, this one isn’t up to me. For me, I listened to the call of following Jesus by being a minister, in the formal sense of the word, here before you today. Yet there are many ministries and all valid and valuable to the body of Christ. Try to listen closely, try to hear the Spirit of God through prayer, in singing music, in sharing conversations. Discern where you are called – and then go, go and see, see what journey Christ might be calling you to, and in all your ministries, may you feel the love of God and share it wherever you are called to follow. Amen.