

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Ephesians 2:17-22
Mark 1:4-11

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Road to Shiloh: Blessings in the Roundabout

When I was in college I tried fairly hard not to go into ministry. I held jobs organizing comedians and bands coming to campus, I was a Resident Advisor or RA, and alongside all of that I served as a peer student minister at the local campus ministry. One of the final decisions for me to follow the call into a vocation of ministry came from a heavy realization that I loved leading people to accomplish things, to create community, but it was hollow without being able to talk about where God was calling us in our work. Every time I thought I should go into this work field, I would find the world dulled by the fact that I couldn't ask people how they felt called by God to arrive at those successes and aspirations of their lives.

For this sermon series I emailed Barry Paget, who was the founding pastor of Shiloh United Methodist Church when it began in 1985, and I asked Barry to share some stories of those early years with me. This one stuck out in that it has been told by not just Barry, but by countless numbers of others as I have listened to you all over the last few months.

One of the best stories was one that was relayed to me years later by Dennis Campbell. I went to the door to visit them after they had come to church for the first time. I rang the bell and his son who was about 4 at the time came to the door. He looked up at me with his mouth open and I asked if his parents were there. He rushed off into the other room. His dad was watching golf on TV and asked him who it was. He replied, "I think it's God." That was about the time I thought I'd better do a children's sermon on the difference between ministers and God, although some of the

kids still thought I might be fooling them kind of like Clark Kent pretending he is not Superman.

During my first year of professional ordained ministry I received a call about doing a funeral. It was a strange first funeral for any young pastor. The funeral was for a young man who was exactly my age, who had died from a brain tumor and who played basketball at Rocky Mountain College. My own questions of mortality arose in the process of course. However, something else sticks out from my experience of serving this man's family.

When I held the meeting with the family, it was clear to me they did not know why a pastor should be involved at all. The next thing that was striking is they did not have any understanding of why they would want prayer or scripture read at the service. This woman had set foot in a church rarely and now during a crisis moment in her life was meeting in one, and would be mourning her new husband in one too.

It would have been a challenging service for even a wise experienced preacher to manage, because these young people planning it had no concept of God as anything beyond but what some of them knew from their sporadic childhood Sunday school classes. I had one friend walk in to me, a church going friend, and say, "I am so glad they are having this service in a church, they need it." I as a pastor wondered if it really was helpful for them to have come to a church for this time. These young people, some of them, saw God as a vindictive bearded man on an ant hill who had just burned down their friend. Others were fighting to understand how a God of love could let this tragedy happen.

The service went well and the church was packed from front to back, with more of these questioning young faces. As I have reflected on this experience it has become clear to me that like Barry's story of the young boy at the door, one of the deepest spiritual gaps that churches have to learn to fill is how to grow in our understanding of God into adulthood. These young people needed a space and a people willing to teach them

how to grow beyond their 3rd grade understanding of God, into one that was mature and could handle the sudden death of a close friend, spouse, or loved one.

One of my biggest challenges as a pastor continues to be meeting families who don't go to church when we have to do funeral planning. People, many of whom, are now in crisis and who have never worked to understand God beyond the small moments they took earlier in life.

This story will leave you wondering, "How do we get people to show up then?" The answer comes from the teachings of Jesus, we have to provide opportunities for us to become community. We need to see where the world's deepest needs and our call to serve God meet. When we study our community, and learn where people need support and provide it, they will come. Then we will be in relationships to invite them into conversations about where they see God in their lives. This involves meeting them in our communities here at the church, and our communities out in the public sphere.

Last fall I was explaining this concept of meeting deep needs to a group of Methodists. I shared that I don't know if you have noticed, but micro-breweries have started to form around the country at a rapid pace. Likewise, coffee stands, tea shops, cider mills and all of these local places of gathering are popping up. They are so successful because each of them provide a micro-community. What if we in the church began forming micro-communities?

On my first youth group ski trip the youth leader taught us a song from what felt like an old sitcom to us at the time. She began singing, "Making your way in the world today, takes everything you got. Finding a place to share all your worries, sure could help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away, Sometimes you got to go where everybody knows your name. And there always glad you came.

We were then instructed, every time we saw someone from our group on the ski hill we didn't know we would shout "Hey Norm!" Because on *Cheers* whenever Norm walked in, everyone said that. How cool would it feel to belong to a community like that...that is what these micro-communities are doing in our culture and it is what God is calling to us now as a church to create...a place where everyone knows your name and they are always glad you came.

Our first scripture reading comes from Ephesians and it will be the letter that will accompany us this whole series. I found it as I was preparing and Cassie King said to me, "When I read Ephesians I just feel like it is Shiloh's letter." Today's passage talks about what micro-communities of Christ can be.

Ephesians 2:17-22 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁷ When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. ¹⁸ We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. ¹⁹ So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. ²⁰ As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. ²² Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

This winter I am inviting us to study the roundabout. Now I know some people don't like them, I know some people love them. Here is what else I know, there is almost no way to get to our Church without going through one of them. There are ways, but those ways are shrinking.

What is intriguing about roundabouts and faith is that I think many people think the church functions like a roundabout. You come to it, enter it, get your direction and move on. Those of us who have been

part of a faith community, one where we have become “fellow citizens,” know that it takes more work than that. However, if we want to invite others to join us in learning that it takes time to get to know people, to support people, to grow community and to know God. We first need them to use our roundabout a few times.

Then we are going to have them to slow down a few times to see what God might be doing. Have you ever noticed the middle of our roundabouts in Billings are pretty well maintained? Yet, you don't see the workers very often. This is how churches feel to people on the outside, we look great, we look well maintained and someone will always be there to do it. The truth is that is not the case, so we are going to be called to get people to slow their lives enough to see what God is doing for them, with them, and through them, so they might join us in the work of creating roundabouts of faith.

Finally, we have to make sure the way to exit and enter our roundabout is clear, because we need people to come to us and go out into the world. These are commands Jesus shares with us, “Come to me all who burdened” and “go out and share the Good News.”

Today on roundabouts, I want you to remember to do something. Easier to do if you are a passenger when traveling a roundabout, so please be careful if you are a driver on a roundabout. We don't want tomorrow's Gazette to read, “Multiple Methodist Roundabout Pileup.” However, if you have a chance watch the faces and reactions of drivers in the roundabout. I have seen 2 kinds of faces: 1. The kind of faces of people who are focused or fearful in the roundabout. These people are negotiating each move of every vehicle and usually they result in what is clearly some aggravation. 2. Those that come to the roundabout knowing everyone needs to get through and trusting it will work.

I have been both and it depends on my day. I can tell you this, when I pray in the morning my roundabout experiences go better.

The first people aren't bad at roundabouts, in fact sometimes we need of few of these folks to get people moving through. We Montana drivers sometimes are too nice and would sit yielding for the whole day to make sure our neighbors got where they needed to go. However, the 2nd type of folks I think are more ready to receive blessings in the roundabout. They enter trusting everyone will get through to their place, and I watch them when a novice roundabout(God knows we have them in Montana) comes into the circle too early and blocks their exit.

These people who trust the roundabout to help us continue the journey tend to slow down and just let that person on by. I have had people do it for me and I know I have, on my better days, done it for others. Next time your in a roundabout look for those faces and see where people are blessing others in the roundabout with grace.

Folks we in the church are about to face a rash of novice roundabouts, new people to our churches. The young people I talked of are about to come looking for answers and if we prepare our space for them and prepare our hearts to walk with them. Those young people, and unchurched people are growing and I will be talking about them in future weeks.

Today's Jesus story is ideal for understanding our call as Christians at this time in history. Because it is about the first step of entering the Christian life. The scripture today is Jesus Baptism and for those of us not aware, Baptism is the first way we welcome new Christians into our community. We baptize infants and adults as a way of recognizing they are a part of us and growing with us.

Here is why it is important as we begin this spiritual journey of understanding our call. New people to our faith are not going to know anything about it. Let me share with you the scripture from Mark:

Mark 1:4-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁴ John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God

to forgive their sins. ⁵ Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals." ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. ¹¹ And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

To an outsider they might miss it, to those who have not experience baptism they might not know, but to those of us who study baptism we know that this passage is about an acknowledgment that Christian baptism is about inviting us to change our hearts to remove that which separates of from a divine love God shares with all that says, "You are my child, whom I dearly love, and with you am pleased and find happiness." An outsider might miss the great knowledge we as Christians find in this passage that, even when we feel un-deserving of God's love, God is always there.

One of my dear friends in the church shared with me a story one time about her granddaughter. Her granddaughter was baptized as a child. Later in her life, as a teenager she was told by another church that her baptism didn't count because she was too young, so she should get baptized again. This drove my friend nuts, she was going off about this other church. I didn't blame her, how awful is it for a church to invalidate another person's experience. In our own church we never re-baptize people we instead re-affirm baptism if the person asks for another experience, to respect their first experience. Only God can judge a baptism anyway.

Despite my friends disagreement she went to her granddaughter's "second baptism." She would never refer to it as just a baptism.

When my friend got back, there was something different about her. She talked about the experience as just a baptism. She said this, "It mattered to my granddaughter, this experience. Whether it was theologically right, it was powerful for her and she has a community she has belonging in."

Friends, fellow citizens of God's kingdom, people are looking for a place where everyone knows their name, a place that will let them enter and exit the roundabout their first time without feeling pushed or pressured. We are called to create micro-communities for people to encounter us, create places where their needs are being met, and to create places that help people learn the ways of Jesus to carry into their lives.

We are called to teach hope and share hope with everyone.

This week watch the people in the roundabout, pray each day for guidance on your journey, and I invite you to join together as we enter this new year as people who remember and remind all that God loves each of us and says to each of us, "It is with you who I am well pleased."
Amen