

How to Live in Community

It's football season; and in America, we love football. It's the thing we agree on. I went to a high school game the other week. I enjoy going to the games as much to see people as to watch the game. I see some of our youth there. When our youth see me their eyes get wider and then, what can only be described as a look of mild terror washes over them. *Oh no, it's my pastor. He saw me. Is he going to talk to me, here, in front of my friends?!!!*

(Kids love me.)

I keep it brief: *hey there kid*, I say.

After the terror passes, (and I don't think I'm imagining this) they look slightly perplexed as to *why I am out in public in the first place. Doesn't he live at the church? Why isn't he there now?*

It reminds me of a prayer once prayed at the dedication of a church, by that great theologian, Homer Simpson:

"Lord, this is a pretty nice cage we built you."

The church building is a nice cage. But it's not the church. Not really. In the New Testament the Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means "the called out." The church is the people who have been called by the Gospel to a new life and new Kingdom. And also we see in the New Testament the *called out* soon become the *sent out*. Jesus sends us back out into the world as witnesses for him. Here is one example from the Gospel:

Read Luke 5.27-31

Here is Luke's account of Jesus meeting Matthew Levi, the tax collector, and inviting him to be his disciple. Now, most of you know the reputation attached to a tax collector in that time and culture. An ancient Roman writer reports that he once saw a monument to an honest tax collector. In other words, an honest tax collector was so rare a specimen that they erected a monument to him.

Matthew Levi was not that rare specimen. He was probably not completely honest. He was, for sure, disliked by all the respectable, religious people.

"Follow me," Jesus tells Levi.

And such was the force and goodness of Jesus' personality that Levi stood up, left all his work, and followed immediately. Please think about how incredible a thing this is, for this person to leave his established life and follow a traveling teacher. Levi must have had so many questions – *where are we going? What will I do in this enterprise? What must I know? How will we live? What's for supper?*

There is so much Levi doesn't know. But just like the blind man that Patrick so ably taught us about last week, Levi clung to "This one thing I do know." I know Jesus is the real deal. I know that I must follow. I know that He comes first. Everything else can wait.

Matthew Levi immediately has a dinner party for Jesus. *Lord, I've got supper tonight.* And he invites all of his friends to the party to meet Jesus. . Levi's first instinct is to share the wonder he has found with others.

So in the span of a few hours, Levi has been *called out* and now he is being *sent out* among his community. This is pure witness. It is at the heart of the mission of the church. God has called all of us from the highways and hedges of our lives and then he says to us, *now get out there and find others!*

"I scattered them among the nations," Zechariah prophesies of the people of God.

So we go to Evergreen on a Sunday or a Tuesday and we share food and we share the Word with other people who need it *just like we do*. So just like the Kingdom of God is both "Now" and "Now Yet;" the Church is both Here and There. Because remember, the Church is not a building. So at least once in awhile, the question on people's minds should be, "Hey, *where* is church this week?"

Some of my most rewarding times in ministry are when I get to talk to people about Jesus who are almost never in church. That is what motivated me to do prison ministry for four plus years. It's what motivates me at Evergreen.

It's rewarding to be the church sent out. But it is also challenging. Not everyone applauds when they see and hear you talk about Jesus. Some people appreciated me being in the prison. Others really didn't want me there. The vibe from some definitely was, "you think you're doing good preacher, but you're not. You're wasting your time." I get that feeling at Evergreen occasionally. On one level, this is just people being negative. But I am reminded there is another level, the realm of the spiritual. I reminded that we are sent out into "the present darkness". We

are sent out to shake the powers that be and to tear down strongholds of the enemy. When we speak the name of Jesus in faith, those powers tremble. And they fight back.

It's not just a mundane battle of schedules and energy and money and boredom and guilt. It's a spiritual battle to keep doing good in the name of Jesus. We don't do it cause it's easy, we do it because people need it, because they are lost in the darkness. They need a light. We do it because Jesus wants everyone to come to his dinner party. Everyone.

When the Apostle Peter realized this in his life he exclaimed, "Now I understand that God shows no partiality, but among all people anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Don't get worn down by the enemy and believe the lie that "nothing you do matters." For example, teachers, what you do matters. The way you teach and interact with your students matters a great deal. I know you battle against so much. You battle against apathy in the school and problems that the kids are bringing from home. . . people are peeing in your coffee cups. But don't mail it in. Do your best with those kids for Jesus!

We've been apathetic and need to get energized. "The sin of respectable people is the flight from responsibility". You and I are responsible for this generation of souls. We've been called, have you allowed yourself to be sent? John Wesley said, "No man ever went to heaven alone. ; he must either find friends or make them."

It is that simple. Matthew Levi had a party and invited his friends to meet Jesus. Who will you invite to meet Jesus with you?