

“Welcome Back to Church”

Luke 14:1-14

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It is September! I hope that you had a wonderful time off on Labor Day. I am sorry to say this, but now, it is time for back to school and back to work. Our church campus is busy with our children. Little Methodist School began school last week. Our Sunday school is back as well. I want to thank the wonderful preschool and Sunday school teachers for their commitment and care for our children. I also want to give my thanks to Bob and Adriane Samcoff, our youth group teachers for continuing the Youth ministry (SWAG, Students Worshipping an Awesome God). There was a kick-off this week on Thursday.

Early Christian churches had three important responsibilities for keeping their identity as Christ's body: *Fellowship* (Koinonia - communion by intimate participation), *Service* (Diaconia - the call to serve the poor and oppressed) and *Christian Education* (Didache - the first Christian catechism, written about 80 A.D.). I want to share a little more about the times of the early Christian church. In Jesus' time, there was no need for Christian education because every Christian church believed that Jesus would be returning soon (Jesus' second coming'). But that was delayed. In the meantime, faith communities had to organize and establish their groups. The word church means "God's people-belonging to the Lord". There was a great need to teach the Christian's attitude, meaning rules and Jesus' understanding of Moses' law and a new image of God as well. The most revolutionary concept that Jesus brought to the disciples was about 'Love'. When we buy a house, we are often asked to consider three important things: Location, location and location. In the same way, when we do our church ministry or when we speak of our Christian life, there are three important things to remember: Love, love and Love. 'Love' is the lens to experience God not only for Jewish people, but open to everyone who accepted Jesus Christ. We should not forget that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi and a teacher.

What if we compare our church to a school? What will be the core curriculum for our classes? From the perspective of Jewish tradition, the Bible is the covenant between Israelites and God. But in our Christian perspective, the whole story of the Bible is summarized by two categories: one is the relationship with God (love your God) and the other is relationship with each other (love one another). Every Sunday, we are reminded and experience God's love through our worship, and teaching our children the love of God. Lastly, we

are willing to serve those who are in great need. Love means compassion, not sympathy, mutuality not hierarchy, and humbleness rather than arrogance, Hospitality rather than self-centeredness, and kindness and patience rather than rude and impatient. Christians are called to practice these diverse spectrums of love through our lives.

Today's Scripture reading shows us illustrations of Jesus' new teachings. **First, humility:** One day, when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the leaders of the Pharisees, all the guests had their eyes on him, watching his every move. Right before him there was a man with hugely swollen joints. So Jesus asked the religious scholars and Pharisees, "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath? Yes or no?" The Pharisees were silent. So Jesus took the man, healed him, and sent him on his way. Then he said, "Is there anyone here who, if a child or animal fell down a well, wouldn't rush to pull him out immediately, not asking whether or not it was the Sabbath?" The Pharisees were stumped. Jesus didn't ignore the importance of keeping the Sabbath, but he reminded people that **compassion and kindness are cores of God's heart and Moses' law.**

Here is another example of power of kindness. One of our members shared with me: "One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I saw a kid from my class walking home from school. His name was Kyle. It looked like he was carrying all of his books. I thought to myself, "Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday? He must really be a nerd." As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him. They ran at him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him. He looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes.

"My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him and as he crawled around looking for his glasses, and I saw a tear in his eye. As I handed him his glasses, I said, "Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives." He looked at me and said, "Hey thanks!" There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude. I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived. As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said he had gone to private school before now. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before. We talked all the way home, and I carried his books.

"Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors, we began to think about college. Kyle was going to be a doctor, and I was going for business on a football scholarship. Kyle had to prepare a speech for graduation. I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak. Graduation day, I saw Kyle. He looked great. Today was one of those days. I could see that he was nervous about his speech. So, I smacked him on the back

and said, “Hey, big guy, you’ll be great!” He looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled. “Thanks,” he said.

“As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began. “Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach... but mostly your friends. I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story.” I just looked at my friend with disbelief as he told the story of the first day we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend. He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker so his mom wouldn’t have to do it later and was carrying his stuff home. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile. “Thankfully, I was saved. My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable.” I saw his mom and dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I realize its depth.” This story reminds us that we should not underestimate the power of your actions. With one small gesture we can change a person’s life for better or for worse. God puts us all in each others lives to impact one another in some way.

Second, hospitality: Jesus continues to share another example for us. “When you’re invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, ‘Friend, come up to the front.’ That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I’m saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face. But if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.” Then he turned to the host. “The next time you put on a dinner, don’t just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. **Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You’ll be—and experience—a blessing.**” Hospitality doesn’t mean a friendly manner to our friends and people that we know, but it is welcoming heart to our strangers.

These parables remind us that Jesus assured us that the essence of church is hospitality and humbleness. We should continue to carry on his teachings in our gatherings. I hope that our church continues to be an authentic faith community of love. People come and experience God through our worship and find God’s love. We teach and share our next generation the love of God in the attitude of humility and hospitality. Our church mission statement always reminds us: our goal and purpose of our gathering is “to promote the love of Christ and nurture spiritual growth for each individual, the church, and the community.” Let us keep up good work together and make good things continue to happen on this hill through our beautiful faith community, Fair Oaks Church. Amen.