

How to Reach Out

John 1: 35-42

It was in the country, rural Virginia. Once each year, in the spring, they gathered on the banks of the river toward evening. They sang together and someone lit a small bonfire. And of course, there was food. At twilight, they celebrated a service of baptism in the river. As each candidate came back up out of the water onto the shore, they were greeted with a warm blanket. One by one, they were embraced by a circle of friends and led over to be warmed at the fire. Last of all, the new young pastor came up out of the water joining them on the bank. One of the older men, a deacon, wrapped a blanket around his shoulders. Their eyes met with understanding. The older man looked around the circle and said simply, “We call this church.”

What is church? Church is a community of people gathered in the Spirit, in the warmth of love. Church is also an organization, an institution, and a tradition. But the Christian church has not always been like that. Originally, it was just Jesus. Then he began calling people to follow him, learn from him, and tell others what they had learned. Today’s gospel lesson tells about part of that calling process, according to the Gospel of John.

The two disciples who had been following John now started to follow Jesus. He saw them and asked what they were looking for. Their response, asking where he was staying, indicated their desire to follow Jesus. So, he invited them to come and see for themselves. They came and stayed to talk with him. They experienced Jesus for themselves and decided to follow him. The first thing one of them did, after getting to know Jesus, was to tell his brother about him. Andrew told Simon Peter that this was the one and then took Peter to Jesus.

Church is a transformational community of people gathered in the Spirit, in the warmth of love. It has certain characteristics or marks. These include worship, spiritual development, social justice, mutual support, love, trust, and outreach. The focus here is that last mark: outreach. Let me ask, “Do you believe church is worth your involvement, worth your time, and worth the energy it requires?” If church is worth the investment of ourselves, then is it not worth sharing – worth reaching out to connect with other people, inviting them to share worship and participate in the life of this church? Reaching out to invite others here, like Jesus reached out to invite new disciples to follow him, helps Crossroads Church not only to grow bigger, but also to grow deeper and richer through the input of new people, new ideas, and new stories.

What is outreach? I took a seminary class once on outreach. Traditionally and typically, churches see outreach as “ya’ll come” and we’ll give you what you need. The assumption has been that the church has all the answers and people just need to come into it to get the questions answered. The assumption has been if the church is the only way to get into heaven when we die, then outreach is as simple as getting people to join a church. We generally don’t around this church that we have all the answers or that we are the ticket to heaven. There are other ways to understand this idea of outreach – of how and why to reach out.

There are several ways to understand what outreach is. These have been part of the church since its beginning. Outreach is the ministry of charity. Reaching out means touching those in need and meeting those basic needs of the hurting, the poor, the imprisoned, and the dying – touching them with the love of Christ. St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, and many others have reached out this way and it continues to be an important type of outreach.

There are other ways the church has reached out over the years. One of the ways that has been generally less popular and less *orthodox* has been outreach as the work of social justice. This is the ministry of holding power accountable, of calling for and working for systemic changes for the purpose of promoting greater equity especially on behalf of the disenfranchised, of minority voices. Such outreach efforts move toward an equity and justice that are manifest themselves financially, racially, and in terms of gender issues and civil rights for all people. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood outreach this way – to empower people on the margins of life. Reaching out for social justice is inspired by a theology of liberation in places such as Latin American and South Africa. It is the Gospel of civil rights in American society.

At a recent event for children, we pulled out the timeline of Crossroads Church. Most of what was written on this timeline was the names of significant people from the past of this congregation, including its parent congregation. There were also significant events in our society including: the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy in 1968. We suffered these losses as a result of the civil rights movement and the great division in our society regarding the Vietnam War. Also listed was the national effort to adopt an Equal Rights amendment in the early 1970's. In our own time, diverse efforts including efforts to close the School of the Americas, end capital punishment, outlaw abortion, end the income tax, and allow prayer in public schools. Whether you and I agree with them or not, these efforts symbolize American society's attempts to reach out and find tangible expressions for the rights of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In this way, they are contemporary expressions of the biblical dream for the liberation of captives, giving of sight to the blind, and the proclamation of Jubilee to the poor and oppressed for all people.

There have been other ways the church has reached out over the years as well – a generally less popular and non-orthodox view sees outreach as the work of social justice. Outreach from this perspective means holding power accountable, calling for and working for systemic changes to promote greater equity for the disenfranchised -- the minority voices. Efforts to move toward equity and justice include financial, racial, gender, and sexual orientation issues. Outreach means to empower people on the margins of life. It is outreach as a theology of liberation in Latin American and South Africa – and civil rights in American society. We were looking back through the timeline of Crossroads Church recently and I noticed, in addition to a listing of significant names and events from the past forty or fifty years, there were also significant events listed. These included the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy in 1968 – as a result of the civil rights movements, the great division regarding the Vietnam War,

and the national effort to adopt an Equal Rights amendment in the early 1970's. These events symbolized American society's efforts toward tangible expressions of the rights of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In some ways, they were contemporary expression of the biblical dream of liberation for captives, sight for the blind, and proclamation of Jubilee for the poor and oppressed.

Crossroads Church is a place, an idea, a building, and a gathering of people. Through this community many people encounter the Holy. We can encounter the divine presence – God -- in others and within ourselves through the ministries of this congregation, through practicing the presence of God, through prayer, supportive relationship, faith exploration, theological discussions, and mostly through worship. Outreach to invite others here, then, is a vitally important part of being Crossroads church. It is essential to our ability to grow, minister to others, and share our particular gifts widely. Outreach as social justice and charitable ministry are equally vital.

Outreach is something else as well. It is how we relate to one another. It is the vital practice of being community. In this sense reaching out means to make space – to give our attention, time, and energy for the purpose of hearing the story of another person – maybe many other persons. Outreach is working to building levels of trust with each other and acting in trustworthy ways in our relationships

None of us can always make space for everyone all the time. There is not enough energy in our bodies and not enough hours in our days for give good attention to every single person we meet. Even if we could, it would probably not be a good idea. It is too easy to move from being responsible in listening to feeling responsible for fixing other people's problems. That just cannot be done. We cannot make space for everyone all the time, but we can make "making space" for others a priority for our lives.

You and I will not always feel trusting toward others, but we can choose to trust others by speaking honestly and truthfully and in love. We can choose to foster trust by listening honestly, opening, and with love. This is a vital part of being church. This approach was the reason for the success of Crossroads Church at its beginning. There was a bond of community that was forged by commitment, love, and hard work. There was a sense that people could trust sharing their stories and their lives with the others in this community.

Crossroads Church today can never stop working at outreach in all its forms. We are called to work for social justice – to look into the face of evil around us and work to stop its horrors. We are called to bind up the wounds of a hurting humanity: to feed the hungry, see the poor, and hear the lonely. We are called to share the good news of this congregation and its journey -- who we are and what we have to offer -- with others. We are called to invite others on the journey with us so that we will grow in our capacity to serve and make a difference in the world. We are called to reach out in this time and place, especially to those who are new to us. Hospitality is more than being friendly. It is being a friend. Outreach is a core truth that expresses itself in social justice, charity, marketing, and community. Jesus was a model for us in many ways. He is a model for

us in the way he called his disciples. It is a good approach for us as church, and as individuals in the church, to follow.

I invite your commitment to follow Jesus by reaching out to embrace others according to the gifts you have and how you sense the Spirit leading you. I invite your commitment to reach out and share the news about Crossroads Church by telling your friends what you have found here. I invite your commitment today to build up this community by making space to listen and hear the story of someone here, someone you don't know very well. Look around and make an appointment to sit down one on one. Just say, "I'd like to get to know you a little better. Tell me about yourself."

When you reach out and make that space, you will discover Christ looking back from the eyes of your new friend and you will find a new depth of joy in your life. You will learn, maybe again and maybe for the first time, the meaning of *shalom* -- that experience the New Testament calls the Kingdom of God. You will affirm for yourself that simple statement made by the old deacon on the bank of that river, "We call this church."