

This is it. This is the last sermon of the year: the last message of Jesus that we celebrate before beginning again next week to wait for his arrival into this world again. We go through this cycle every year - starting with the miracle of Christmas where God is born into human flesh as the baby Jesus, jumping to Easter when political and religious leaders in the Roman colony of Palestine force the state to execute Jesus out of fear of his peaceful spiritual power, and then spending the rest of the year telling the rest of the story - the time in between - the life and ministry of Jesus and his Jewish ancestors that inspired this spiritual revolution we now call Christianity.

When I began as your pastor, we began at the beginning - Starting with Creation where God created all things good. We met Abraham and experienced God's Covenant with him. We followed Jacob as he Wrestling with God. We witnessed Joseph Following God's Call despite his great suffering. We discovered a Hebrew People growing strong and enduring enslavement in Egypt. We found Moses paying attention to God in the burning bush and leading the Israelites to freedom. We journeyed with them - crossing the wilderness and being sustained by God, and finally entering the promised land and being redeemed by God even after sinning against God.

The Israelites entered into a cycle of sin against God followed by redemption through God. The Israelites became a kingdom, and over time the ruling elite in ancient Israel sin against God and against their own people. God responds by sending them into exile as the Babylonian empire takes over the land of Canaan. The prophet Ezekiel shares his message from God for the Israelites in exile in Babylon. The message for those in exile is what Dorcas read this morning. "I will seek out my sheep who have been scattered."

Since we met in June this year, we have followed the book of Matthew from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus called his disciples from their ordinary lives. We learned the challenges that Jesus calls us into as disciples. We Mourned with Jesus when John the Baptist was executed by the king. We Followed Jesus to the faraway place where he miraculously fed five thousand families from five loaves and two fish. We experienced Jesus' ministry of healing the sick. We struggled to understand Jesus' parables. And we watched as powerful religious leaders - afraid of our Savior - questioned Jesus in order to prepare a legal case for his execution.

Today we find Jesus outside the city of Jerusalem, sharing his final parable with his beloved disciples - trying as he could to prepare these former peasants for their role as the leaders of what would become Christianity.

Jesus describes for them a glimpse of what the end times might look like when the son of Humanity returns. He reports that upon his return, he would gather in the people of every nation like a shepherd.

Jesus takes on the identity of a shepherd throughout the book of Matthew. He had compassion on the crowds in chapter 9 because they "were like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus sends his disciples to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" to heal and proclaim the reign of

"Recognizing Jesus"
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Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

God. Jesus teaches us to leave the 99 sheep and go out to find the one lost sheep of our flock. This shepherding, this gathering in, is only complete when all the nations are gathered together.

Then comes judgment from Jesus as king. Jesus transitions from gathering to separating the sheep from the goats. Will we be blessed or cursed by God in this final judgment? The characters in the parable are all surprised by the reasoning for the king's judgment - both the blessed and the cursed. None of them were able to recognize that within the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner, there was the face of Jesus. The righteous ones were surprised because they had no idea that the people they cared for in their lives were actually Jesus made flesh. The cursed similarly ask, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?"

When was it? We certainly enjoy knowing when it is necessary to serve our neighbor with love. When should we provide a meal for 75 people living in homeless shelters and when can we walk right by the homeless in the street? When should we consider the needs of the poor in our government policy and when should we bend to the goals of powerful corporations or personal pleasure? When should we go out to find the lost sheep in our congregation and when should we gather together in fellowship?

These are not easy questions with easy answers. Some believe we have little control over these answers at all. So how could we possibly live our lives by this message?

Our PCUSA denomination decided last year that one way of living out this parable message is to "locate ourselves with the poor, to advocate with all of our voice for the poor, and to seek opportunities to take risks for and with the poor." This goes beyond just providing some hospitality for those vulnerable in our midst, this says we need to be in relationship with those of us who are in this position of need so that we can understand how to support and advocate for the needs of the oppressed.

Jesus tells this parable about how he is encountered among "the least" - the poorest, the most isolated, the imprisoned, the sick, and the hungry. We hear with sober conviction Jesus declaring that a church which fails to serve with and for the poor does not know Him.

So how can we get to know Jesus? The more that we learn about Jesus in scripture, the more we may be willing to discover Jesus in the face of a stranger and even in ourselves. If Jesus was here with us today sitting in the last pew of the sanctuary, how would we treat him? What would we want to know about Jesus? And what risks might we take in order to serve him?

Our relationship with Jesus cannot be disconnected from our relationships with real people. We are the body of Christ in this sanctuary today and we continue to encounter Jesus in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the sick and the incarcerated.

During our second discernment gathering last week, one of the four major needs that was expressed was a desire for deeper relationship. Some of us have been returning to this place of worship every week for decades and still desire deeper relationship with those around us in this sanctuary. What if we truly believed that within each person gathered here was the presence of

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Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

Jesus? How might you cherish each other differently? How might you see each other differently? What questions might you ask to better understand each other?

If you believe that we are the body of Christ as we claim in our communion as the church, then take a moment to look around at those gathered here with you...

Jesus, our shepherd has gathered each person into this sanctuary today. Take a moment to recognize Jesus - our savior - in the faces of your neighbors.

If you believe that we are the body of Christ, then I invite you to say to your neighbor, "I see Jesus in you." "I see Jesus in You."

In our Discernment Gathering last week, Pat Naujoks named a desire to participate in "projects with a purpose" where she might provide a meaningful service for the community and equally important - she can form meaningful relationships with others serving with her. There was a lot of affirmation of this concept. And I believe this congregation has a history of "projects with a purpose."

So how did this desire for relationship become such a deep need in our congregation? Last year this congregation celebrated 125 years of life. In those 125 years there have been many cycles of creation, conflict, loss, grief and renewal. Those original 29 people who saw a need for a Presbyterian congregation in this community would surely have trouble recognizing the transformed community gathered here today.

The transformation - the opening up - the inclusivity and hospitality - that allowed for the diverse community of Morgan Park to be embodied in this congregation came at great cost to certain relationships. Many of you have witnessed losses in this congregation - whether they be the deaths of important leaders in the church or the conflicts that have driven people away. You may have experienced losses in ministry practices or social events that made sense for the people who used to gather in this space, but some of these traditions were lost in the transformation - making room for new expressions of God's love and grace inspired by this new community. When we experience these losses, we recognize the grief that we risk when we engage in meaningful relationship.

Recognizing Jesus in our neighbor - whether that neighbor is here in this sanctuary or out in the world - comes at great risk. We risk vulnerability when we seek meaningful relationship. We are vulnerable to rejection and loss, but perhaps even more dangerous - we are vulnerable to being transformed ourselves. We risk our current identity by engaging in relationship with others. If we are truly committed to relationship, then we cannot expect to remain unchanged.

At our Session Meeting in September, we heard from Liz Bain that she was being transformed by her new relationships with the children in her Sunday School class. These children, our children had deep meaningful understandings of relationship and forgiveness already imprinted within them. When they gathered to discuss forgiveness and grace, Liz reported being inspired by the ways these young people were living out God's grace in their

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Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

personal relationships. They all risked vulnerability that day in order to find the deep meaningful relationships that they desired.

I believe God is the force behind that desire. God is the web of connection between us - the force that pulls us together despite our brokenness. When we do not feel worthy of love or relationship; When we do not want to risk our life or our identity; When we feel the pain of loss too many times; God pulls us back into relationship through the power of Grace. God's love is stronger than the power of sin that separates us.

So what are you willing to risk in order to seek out the face of Jesus in those around you? What risks will you take to seek out meaningful relationships with the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked the sick and the incarcerated? What risks are you willing to take to find Jesus in the relationships you have with those gathered in this church?

If you can find Jesus in the face of your neighbor, then others will surely be looking for Jesus in you. As we end this liturgical year and begin our season of hope - waiting for Jesus to be born in a manger - let us take time to care for ourselves. Let us care for our grief and celebrate what we have lost as a risk we were willing to take for deep meaningful relationship. Let us have grace for ourselves as we recognize our own brokenness in new ways. Let us allow God's love to heal our broken hearts so that we can love again.

As we end this time of meditation, I invite you to take out the prayer card in your bulletin. On this prayer card, I invite you to write down a prayer for yourself. In what ways do you need God's love in this time? What risks are you willing to take for deep meaningful relationship? How can you care for yourself as you seek to be available to others?

"For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak..."

God gathers us in as a shepherd gathers sheep. God calls us into relationship - always seeking to extend God's love into our lives. Let us allow God to gather us. Let us receive God's gift of love. Let us be transformed by relationship. Let us recognize Jesus in each other this day and in the days to come.

Amen