Psalm 123; Mark 6:1-13

“Belonging in Community”

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Last summer, I experienced one of the coolest things I think I might ever experience. There had been a lot of build up to this event and people kept talking about how cool it was going to be, but it was hard for them to explain how or why it was so cool so I didn’t really get it. I didn’t understand all the hype and all the excitement…until, it was happening. Until I was standing in the middle of a random casino parking lot in the middle of Tennessee with hundreds of strangers and we all turned our eyes up to the sky to witness the total solar eclipse. At first there was silence as we all took in this rare occurrence. Then, as it got darker, there was cheering and clapping and laughing and some people were in tears and, even as I struggle to explain what happened in those few short minutes, I can say that it was incredible. It was partly the astronomical event, but it was more so the fact that this event brought all of us together. Most of us had traveled pretty far to get there and we arrived several hours before the total eclipse happened. So during the waiting, we all chatted with the people around us, shared stories, shared where we were from and why we were there. We didn’t have a whole lot in common, besides the desire to see the eclipse, but we formed a kind of community in that parking lot that day, as we were bonded by something greater than any one of us or any of our differences.

When I think about that day, I think about the other places and events where we feel that kind of connection, that sense of community, with close friends and family or with complete strangers that you will probably never see again. It’s like those YouTube videos of thousands of people waiting for a concert to start and they’re all singing along to every word of Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen. It’s the feeling of leaving the stadium with your fellow fans after your team comes from behind to win a huge game. It’s gathering around the table with cousins that you don’t see often enough for Thanksgiving dinner. It’s worshipping together and celebrating the baptisms of new members of the family of God. It’s serving alongside one another on a mission trip or at the homeless shelter. It’s in these moments, in these experiences, where we feel connected to each other and maybe to God, where we feel like we belong to a community, whether it is a temporary one in a parking lot, or a permanent one around a dinner table or in a sanctuary.

But I can’t think about these moments of connection and belonging, about the communities I have been part of, without also acknowledging the fact that they are not perfect. Whether it is an institution or a relationship or some other kind of community, there are also moments that fall short of bringing people together. There are broken relationships and conflicts and arguments over who is in and who is out. There’s the work of navigating differences and trying to get along and making more room at the table. Because community takes work and it is never done perfectly. It doesn’t magically come together so that everyone is best friends with everybody else and everyone believes the same things and everything is sunshine and rainbows all the time. Community is not without challenges.

And we get a taste of that in our readings for today. When I read this text from Mark, where Jesus is rejected in Nazareth and the disciples are sent out to places where they might not be welcome, I see all of these challenging pieces of community. There is rejection and lack of hospitality and even though Jesus knows that prophets are not honored in their hometowns and among their own kin, he still goes to his hometown and is amazed at the unbelief of the people there and he experiences what it is like to not belong.

So when Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to go on their own journeys, he tells them that there might be places that will not welcome them. And we might ask ourselves why Jesus went there in the first place, if he knew that he would not be welcome? And why would he then send out the disciples knowing that they would likely experience the same lack of belonging? I’d imagine the disciples might have asked these same questions and there would have been no shortage of disagreement and difference among them. We can speculate about motive all we want, but this is the story we have. One that highlights the challenges and what is difficult about community.

But what if we see the other stuff as well? What if we see that even amidst the unbelief in his hometown, Jesus was still able to cure a few sick people? What if we notice that despite the rejection Jesus experienced in Nazareth, the disciples continued to follow him as he traveled and taught and ministered? Or that when Jesus sent out the disciples to continue his mission, he didn’t send them out alone, but two by two, in pairs, together? And that if they were not welcomed somewhere, they were not supposed to give up. They were supposed to move on? Because with all the difficult realities that this passage gives us, it also shows us that Jesus’ ministry was not one of going it alone. Jesus had followers and he sent them out to participate in the ministry that he was doing. It was a ministry in and of and about community.

Our psalm today is an example of this because it is a community prayer for help. It starts off in one voice, for the person who would be leading the people in prayer, saying “**I** lift up my eyes,” but then it takes on the many voices of the community who would have been gathered together to say “**our** eyes look to the Lord our God.” The community, together, prays to God for mercy in the midst of their suffering. In the midst of whatever other challenges they faced, they chose to face the challenges of community, to pray together.

When we read stories like Mark, when we look around and see all the barriers to community that exist, some that we ourselves put up, we might be tempted to give up on the idea of community altogether and retreat from the challenges of life together. We might look at our differences and come to the conclusion that they are too big to overcome. But these passages call us to the very opposite. They highlight the challenges, yes. But they still call us together. They call us to community. Not because it’s easy or because we will always figure it out perfectly. Sometimes we will not be welcomed and sometimes we will not be welcoming. But, we are called to community because that is Jesus’ ministry. It is relationship and connection and belonging. It’s moving along, even and especially, when it’s hard. It is welcoming the stranger and the marginalized. It is realizing that we welcome and love others because God welcomes and loves us. We are called to community because the call to participate in Jesus’ ministry, of good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom to the oppressed, that call is greater than any challenges against it.

Last summer during the solar eclipse, we made a community that day in that parking lot because we were all looking toward the same thing. We got there in different ways, we were different people with different stories, but when we came together, we were all looking for the eclipse. And that’s who we are as the church, different people, different stories, different ways of finding ourselves in this place, but like the psalmist, we are all looking toward God, in one way or another, which means even when community is difficult, even when it seems impossible, the thing that brought us here will keep us together. Like the disciples, we share a common calling. Jesus has sent us. So, if we keep showing up, if we keep striving for community then we might just catch more of those glimpses of belonging.

Amen.