

The Gift of Misfits

A sermon in the 2016 Lenten worship series

“Gifts from the Dark Woods”

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- Romans 12:1-2 So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (The Message)
- Luke 19:28-38 ³⁷ As Jesus approached the road leading down from the Mount of Olives, the whole throng of his disciples began rejoicing. They praised God with a loud voice because of all the mighty things they had seen.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Though Christians can feel like “misfits” at odds with the world’s values, we are strengthened and encouraged by fellow “misfits” to stand for the values of Jesus.

In the movie comedy “Stripes,” Bill Murray is a taxi driver with girlfriend troubles and money woes. His frustration with his job leads him one day to abandon his cab in the middle of a New York City bridge, with a passenger still sitting in the back seat. As he later tells his best friend, “I’ve had an interesting morning. In the last two hours I’ve lost my job, my apartment, my car, and my girlfriend.”¹ In a moment of impulsiveness, he and his buddy decide that the way to get their lives back on track is to enlist in the United States Army.

Nearing the end of Basic Training, camaraderie within their platoon has deteriorated so much that the men are on the verge of fighting among themselves. But Murray rallies his platoon-mates. He points out that despite their differences, they can come together because they do, in fact, have something in common. What they have in common, he tells them, is that, “There’s something wrong with us, something very, very wrong with us. Something seriously wrong with us... [We *enlisted* in the Army].”²

Yes, they had something in common with one another... but they were at odds with the rest of the world. In fact, the platoon’s do-it-yourself training was far from ordinary in the world of the armed forces with its mentality of orders-are-orders and everything-by-the-book. Consequently, Bill Murray and his platoon mates were, well, “misfits.”

In our Lenten series “Gifts of the Dark Woods” we’ve been considering how it is that when we feel our lives have entered a time of uncertainty, distress, confusion, anxiety – what Dante referred to as the “dark woods” periods of life – it’s in those uncertain, uncomfortable times that God may provide us with gifts that we might not otherwise notice. Based on the work of pastor Eric Elnes in his book Gifts of the Dark Wood: seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers), in previous weeks we’ve considered how “uncertainty” could be a gift from God, or how “emptiness” could be a gift, how “being thunderstruck” or even “getting lost” could be gifts to awaken our senses to the presence of the Holy Spirit and give us glimpses into new possibilities for our lives.

¹ Dialogue from the motion picture “Stripes” (Columbia Pictures, 1981) <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083131/quotes>, accessed 3/15/2016

² Dialogue from the motion picture “Stripes” (Columbia Pictures, 1981) <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083131/quotes>, accessed 3/15/2016

Last week we thought it odd that “temptation” could be considered a gift of God... but then we learned how we actually can be tempted to do “the wrong good” – things that may be inherently good, but they’re *not* what God is calling us to do. If you thought “temptation” was an odd God-gift, how do you feel about this week’s gift: the gift of “misfits”?

So here’s the proposition: we are misfits. I am. You are. We are misfits. As people who seek to honor God by following the way of Jesus, what we believe, what we strive to be and to do, the kind of people we aspire to be... none of it seems to fit easily into the world we live in. We’re misfits “in a world absorbed by materialism, mass-market consumerism, ‘religi-tainment,’ and quick fixes.”³

It may feel like the Christian faith is fighting an uphill battle these days. In America’s Eisenhower Era of the 1950s and into the ‘60s, church was the place to be. You moved into town, you joined the church. In most communities, you had several to choose from. Locally and on the national scene, the Christian church was a respected institution. Church membership was part of your social identity like your address, your occupation, your family tree, which high school or college you attended. The church felt compelled to speak out on issues affecting society, culture, government, foreign relations, and the church’s voice was heard, though not always heeded.

But now, in many quarters of American society the church is viewed as antiquated, frozen in time, out of touch, irrelevant to the issues people face every day. For years pollsters have asked the question “Have you attended religious services in the past seven days?” The response has been consistent for decades – about forty percent of people reported having attended services. That means that about sixty percent of people are *not* engaged in communal worship activities. But wait – further polling revealed that many poll respondents reported recent worship attendance even though they didn’t actually attend. They answered that they did because they feel they are “good Christians” and “should have” been in worship. Were they lying? Not exactly – it’s a phenomenon called “social desirability bias” – people answer based on what they think they *should* answer. What research suggests is that the forty percent participation figure is probably about one-third too high, meaning that *more* than sixty percent of Americans aren’t engaged in church in any given week.⁴

Engaged, active worshipping Christians like us are in a minority. It may seem to us that voices promoting Christ-like perspectives are being drowned out in our culture. It may feel like Christ-inspired values are regularly being overwhelmed:

- influential celebrities promote self-interest over charity;
- self-importance and self-promotion is trumpeted rather than compassion toward strangers;
- some forces in society celebrate arrogance and mock humility;
- some forces seek advantages for themselves rather than seeking justice for all;
- there are even forces that *encourage* intolerance rather than urging respect and understanding.

The things that Jesus promotes are being ignored by a society that has turned a blind eye to his example and a deaf ear to his appeal. Where does that leave us? As followers of Jesus, each of us may wonder where we fit in our society. We may wonder if we fit in anywhere. Where’s our place in the world? Are we alone, or is there anyone with us?

Before we sink into despair, the Holy Spirit encourages us to recognize that being a misfit is a gift from God.

Apparently, personal charisma was one of the attractions Jesus held. People were drawn to the hope-filled and inspiring words he spoke. Twelve men left their livelihoods to become his disciples. Walked away from their fishing boats or their accounting offices. The disciples’ relatives, friends, co-workers surely saw them as oddballs. The disciples themselves were perplexed by some of the ideas Jesus imparted to them:

³ Eric Elnes, *Gifts of the Dark Wood: seven blessings for soulful skeptics (and other wanderers)*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, 157.

⁴ “How many North Americans attend religious services (and how many lie about going)?” at http://www.religioustolerance.org/re_l_rate.htm, accessed 3/16/2016

- God's really *that* merciful?
- God loves *everybody*?
- God just accepts us as we are — no hoops to jump through?

As they began to accept this good news for themselves and share it with others, some people embraced it, but probably many others scoffed. Having chosen to follow Jesus, the disciples had become misfits in their own society.

On that long-ago day that we recall this morning, Jesus and his disciples engaged in a ceremonial entry into Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the largest city in the region. Center of commerce. Locus of military and political power. Its Jewish temple the center of the religious social order. Jesus and the Twelve were accompanied by a small throng of folks who also had been following Jesus for days or weeks. They were joined along the roadside by some of the local citizenry who had heard about this inspiring rabbi, or who simply wanted to see what all the fuss was about. This cloak-and-donkey parade wove its way down the Mount of Olives and up the Temple Mount into Jerusalem... where the parade was basically ignored. Roman guards kept an eye on them, but that was about it. There were always pilgrimages and parades by individuals or groups moved by religious fervor of some kind or another. This group — whooping it up about a leader who was riding — wait! Was that a donkey? You've got to be kidding! — this group was just another example of people who didn't get it. They were out of their element in the big city. They don't know how things are done around here. These hicks from the sticks don't realize that what really matters is reputation and influence and image and money and tradition and might and connections.

Yes, Jesus and his followers were misfits in Jerusalem. What impact could this band of misfits possibly have?

Actually, you are the answer to that last question: "What impact could that band of misfits possibly have?" A year... a hundred years... a thousand years... *two-thousand* years later, the Holy Spirit has filled you with faith in God by the witness and word of Jesus the Son. You hold a vision of a divine kingdom reigning "on earth, as it is in heaven."

But how can you, "misfit" that you are, stand against the callous cruelty and self-centeredness of this present age? Here's how you can do it: God blesses each of us with other "misfits" to be by our side. We are buoyed by the knowledge that we have other people who also treasure the Christ-inspired values of compassion and mercy, tolerance and respect, forgiveness and encouragement.

The world may be at odds with what our band of misfits values. In the Fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah the prophet notes how the world tends to miss what God has in mind:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.⁵

But we are the world's voice of conscience urging respect, compassion, generosity, forgiveness, collaboration. We are inspired by Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, emboldened by a heritage, reinforced by companions in this good work. Our congregation of misfits is joined by every other congregation of misfits in this country and in churches the world over.

The Palm Sunday parade was dwarfed in size by the citizenry of Jerusalem who went about their daily tasks oblivious (at the time) to the appeal being made. We followers of Jesus are similarly outnumbered today, but our hope-driven effort is not futile. We continue to invite the world to join us in following Jesus, knowing that his way is constructive, not destructive. And though our convictions may make us feel like misfits, we press on because we are encouraged and strengthened by sisters and brothers in the faith, near and far, known and unknown to us, fellow "misfits" who are God's gift for our journey.

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⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9 New Revised Standard Version