

“Called as Partners in Christ’s Service: Respect”

John 4:1-15

October 2, 2016

World Communion Sunday

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How appropriate that we read *this* Scripture today, on World Communion Sunday! Back in Jesus’ day, the Samaritans were loathed by their neighbors, the Jews. Though they were the Jewish peoples’ closest neighbors, they were far more despised than other foreigners from farther away. For one thing, they worshiped a variety of different gods, and had a different set of values than the Jewish people did. And though Jews and Samaritans shared some of the same DNA – or perhaps *because* they shared some of the same ancestry – Samaritans were considered disgusting, idolatrous, and sometimes even dangerous. Who knows; perhaps today, a political leader would have suggested building a wall along their border, and making them pay for it.

But Jesus ... Jesus doesn’t go that route.

- Instead of avoiding the Samaritans, Jesus goes right to them.
- Instead of dismissing the Samaritans, Jesus engages them in conversation.
- Instead of judging the Samaritan woman – alone at the well in the middle of the day without a brother or husband in sight, her implied promiscuity is later confirmed in conversation – instead of judging her, Jesus treats her as the child of God he knows her to be.

Jesus seeks out the outsider, takes her seriously, and treats her as a child of God. In other words, he bears the attitude of respect – which is just what we’re called to do when we call ourselves Christian. Respect is part of the *mission Dei* – the mission of God. And the more we practice it, the more we bless the world; the more we practice respect, the more Christ-like we become.

So what does that look like in our day and age? Where do we meet people who are different, and how do we treat them when we do? Sometimes,

like Jesus, we go out of our way – when we go on mission trips to Tanzania, or to Syria, for example. In fact, in the next few weeks, Nina Strnad will be sharing about Syria and Dave Tolmie will be sharing about Tanzania! But sometimes ... sometimes we don't have to leave our space at all. Sometimes, the “foreigner,” the “different” one, comes to us. Which is just what I experienced yesterday at our rummage sale: our church building became “the joyful feast of the people of God” where people from “north and south and east and west” gathered together in the kingdom.

There was Hagop, a student at the college from Armenia, who came to try on shirts. I met Julie and her friend from Green Bay, Wisconsin. Deepak, a chaplain at Condell Hospital who is from India, came to volunteer. A little six-year-old boy, Derek, came from Englewood with his Mom and Grandma; he was proud to tell me all about his baseball coach who teaches them “practice makes perfect.” I could go on and on. But instead, I'll stop, and I'll ask Martha Zeeman to share her testimony with you, and the experience she's had of this practice of faith, this mission of Christ we call “rummage.” Martha?

When Chris asked me to give a testimonial about rummage, my mind was full of all the stories I could tell. Like the time my son came home so excited about the golf clubs he purchased at rummage. I took a closer look at them and realized there was a sticker around the grips and it said “Greg Zeeman” So.... yes, John bought his fathers old clubs, which we had donated to rummage. Or the time we went to the All Church Auction and my husband informed me that I couldn't buy anything this time. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the night, I learned that HE bought a grandfather clock that is now in our dining room for ALL who enter our home to see. Or the time that I bought a “new” dress from the French room and wore it the next week to an event and PROUDLY told everyone where I purchased by “fabulous” dress. Or, the time I beat out my

youngest sons 4th grade teacher in bidding for a knight in armor, which is prominently displayed in his bedroom, an even better prize since his teacher wanted it! A proud moment for Mom! I have many funny and fond memories related to rummage, but I've also learned a lot through rummage. A lot about treating people with respect.

One my first memories of working at rummage is of a mother who comes to the rummage sale every year. She is a mother of 4 girls and she comes every year to get "NEW" clothes for the girls. The girls "shop" for a long time, but they don't purchase right away. This Mom has been coming for many years and she knows that at a certain time of the day, we reduce the prices. At at the very end of the day we have a "bag sale" where you can stuff as much as you can fit in the bag, which is a fabulous bargain when you're trying to clothe 4 girls. However, people aren't "supposed" to save things.

The first year I met this Mom was my first year working rummage. I figured out pretty quickly what she was doing and didn't think it was right for her to save things. I didn't think it was fair to the rest of shoppers. It was against the rules. It seemed very black and white to me. I spoke to another volunteer and suggested that we tell this Mom that she had to purchase her items. The other volunteer had been working rummage longer than I had and she knew this Mom from years past, and knew that she came every year. Instead of chastising the Mom, she helped her shop. She engaged the young girls and helped them find things they liked. She showed kindness and respect to this Mom, who was doing her best to clothe her 4 young girls in "new" clothes. She showed kindness to the girls and made them feel special. They ended up waiting until the bag sale, and they went home with lots of fabulous new clothes for each girl. They paid less than they would have if they bought it all earlier, but is that really so bad? Now it may not be the absolute right thing to do in terms of "following the rules", but in my opinion,

it was the right thing to do for this family. It is something I'll never forget. Our rummage volunteer recognized this woman and was compassionate towards her. She showed this family kindness and respect, and that was far more important.

I also remember a young boy from Lake Forest College who was graduating and needed a suit. He came into the men's department and was completely at a loss as to what to do. Luckily for him, there were lots of experienced Moms who were at the ready to help him. They found him so many suits and work clothes, he had to make two trips to get it all home. What I remember most about this was the love and care all the Moms showed this boy. They told him which suits were worth the price, which ones fit him well, which ones should be tailored and even where he could get them tailored. You would have thought he was their own son. They treated this stranger as if he was their own son.

I also thought about the friendships I've made at Rummage. I have several close friends who work at rummage and we have a great time together, but it's the people I didn't know before that I think of now. I've worked with people who I only vaguely knew and after spending the day with them sorting clothes, picking up hangers, adding up numbers, stuffing bags, and eating lunch in the parish house, I've come to know these people in a way that would have otherwise been impossible. When you work for rummage, we're all on equal ground. We are all working hard, getting dirty, and getting to know each other in ways that really isn't possible in every day life. A prime example of this is the Bond Street department in rummage. Maureen Olsen, who now chairs rummage, was in charge of the finer menswear for many years and she started calling it Bond Street. There are a few boys who are Boy Scouts in Troop 46 (which is out of this church) who also happen to love vintage menswear and expensive menswear. After working to sort and set up,

which all the scouts do, these boys would love to shop. They spent a lot of time in Bond Street and got to know Maureen and now THEY are running Bond Street. A bunch of 16/17 year old boys developed a fantastic relationship with so many adults at rummage and are now an integral part of it themselves. There is no other place that I know where I that happens. It is amazing to see.

Lastly, I would say that the best part of rummage is that you have the opportunity to work with people from so many walks of life. Many of the volunteers are folks who come to our church, but many are not. All are working for their own reasons. Some as a way to give back, and some as a way to be able to attend the workers. When you're working with them, their motivation doesn't matter. We're all in it together.

We're all in it together. That's exactly it. What Jesus knew when he reached out to the Samaritan woman at the well is this: we're all in it together. Isn't that what Ryan and Matt - the teenagers in menswear – know, and the Lake Forest College kid and the Moms who scoped out suits for him know, and what Martha Zeeman knows beyond a shadow of a doubt? We're all in this together, each of us equally valued, each of us equally worthy of dignity and respect.

Why? Not because we're "politically correct" or even just plain nice! No, we're all in this together *because our faith affirms that's how God designed it*. From the beginning, in Genesis 1, we're reminded, we're *all* made in the image of God ... every single one of us, made in the image and likeness of God. And as Jesus reminds us again and again, we're *all* children of God, precious in God's sight. Even if we're a Samaritan ... or a Syrian ... or a Muslim ... or a Mexican.

Let me close with a story. Fred Craddock was professor at Emory University when he and his wife went on vacation one year to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. They rented a little cabin beside a mountain stream. Their first night away, they visited a little diner – wooden table and chairs, plaid tablecloths, down-home cooking. An old man in overalls came in, stopping at every table, and then came to greet the visitors and ask where they were from. When Fred said he was a preaching professor, he pulled up a chair and said, “I’ve got a preacher story to tell you.” The old man said,

“I was born and raised right here in the mountains of East Tennessee. I never knew who my father was. My mother gave me her name ... I was born out of wedlock - in those days, quite a stigma to live with.

“I always felt badly about myself. When I was growing up, my classmates at school said some very unkind things about me. When I went to town on Saturday, I had the feeling that people were talking about me behind my back. After I was born, my mother did not go to church anymore. She did not feel welcome at church.

“My grandmother knew how important it was for me to go to church. Every Sunday, she took me to a little Methodist church nestled against the hillside. We would arrive just as the service started so we could avoid speaking to anyone. We would sit on the back pew. When the service was over, we would leave immediately after the benediction and scoot right out the door. We didn’t want to talk to anybody! ...

“One Sunday, as we started to leave church, the usher stopped us at our usual exit. ‘You can’t go out this way. We’ve had a winter storm, and ice and snow have covered the steps. It isn’t safe. You’ll need to leave by the side door.’

“For the first time, I found myself caught up in the line of people headed down front to speak to the preacher. I did not want to talk to that preacher. He frightened me so much! I was walking down the aisle, glancing to the left and to the right. I saw the side door and saw my opportunity to make an escape. As I started for the exit, I felt an enormous hand on my shoulder. I whirled around, and I was staring straight into the face of the preacher.

“The preacher asked me the question that I had dreaded for fourteen years, ‘Boy, who is your daddy?’ The silence of that moment was deafening. Then the preacher looked at me and said, ‘Oh, now I see the resemblance. You are a child of God. You go and claim your inheritance.’”

Fred Craddock said he felt cold chills going up and down his spine. He looked at that old mountaineer and said, “Please tell me your name.” The old man said, “My name is Ben Hooper.” Then Fred Craddock remembered his own grandfather telling him the story of an illegitimate boy who grew up in the mountains of East Tennessee, a boy who became an attorney, a boy whom the people of Tennessee later elected to two terms as their governor. That boy was Ben Hooper.”ⁱ

Seeing every person as a child of God, equally beloved. That’s neither pity, nor judgment. That’s just plain old respect. The kind of respect Jesus shows the Samaritan woman. The kind of respect Jesus shows us all.

“I see a resemblance. You’re a child of God. Go, claim your inheritance.”
Amen.

ⁱ <https://kirkhneely.com/2009/06/08/the-story-of-ben-hooper/>