

**Community for Non-Members**

Luke 14:12-24

One Sunday, my family and I visited a church in Midland for a different worship experience while we were on vacation. The church has a beautiful sanctuary and has been known as a mission-centered church. However, when my family entered the church, no one came to greet us. So, we quietly found our seats and had worship there. After the service, I didn't hear any welcoming words from the preaching pastor that day, even though I shook hands with him. From the beginning to the end of service, my family and I had been anonymous. We felt unwelcomed, and throughout the service, we were total strangers.

We can define the church from different angles. One of the definitions of the church that captured the minds of Christians for centuries was "**Where the Bishop is, there is the church.**" This definition was from the letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Church at Smyrna in Asia Minor in the 2nd Century. In every local Church is the *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος: epi-"over" or "upon," skopeo-"to look" or "to watch": "overseer" or "watcher."→ Bishop) who oversees what happens in the territory. All the priests and lay leaders are called to cooperate with their Bishop, who is at the center of the leadership at the church. It was a very clergy-centered concept of the church.

One of the dominant concepts of the church between the 5th and 8th centuries was this: "**The Church is the fellowship with holy persons.**" Here, the English word "fellowship" is from the Greek word "*koinonia*." *Koinonia* is most often translated into English as **participation, sharing, communion, or fellowship**. This concept is based on the story of Acts 2:38-47. "**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**" (Acts 2:42 NIV). The focus shifted from clergy to all people who shared the same Lordship and fellowship with Jesus Christ. This concept of the church heavily influenced John Wesley and other Anglican pastors in the 18th century.

And now, we have a new definition of the church from the perspective of its call and mission from God. "**The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.**" It was William Temple who made this definition of the church. William Temple was an English Anglican priest who served as Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s. His theology influenced the Anglican Church and many other Protestant denominations in the United States.

Even the United Methodist Church has shared the same missional concept of the church from his definition: **“The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world.”** (*The Book of Discipline* (2016), ¶ 202).

I still remember the speech from my seminary president during my commencement. **“As you read the Bible, please do not forget to read the newspaper.”** His message was clear: “you have to know what’s going on in the world and understand the realities of what’s happening through the lens of the Bible.”

Today’s scripture gives us some lessons on who we are as a community for nonmembers preparing for the Kingdom feast on earth.

**First of all, our eyes have to be fixed on what will happen in the last stage of our lives as we try to build a community for non-members.**

**“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”** (Luke 14:13-14)

Lesslie Newbigin, (British missionary bishop in India, Theologian, and Ecumenical Statesman) who was a British missionary bishop in India says, **“The Church is not to be defined by what it is, but by that End to which it moves.”** That is why he defines the church from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, which is the goal of the church’s missions on earth. He says, **“The church exists not for itself and not for its members but as a sign and agent and foretaste of the kingdom of God, and that it is impossible to give faithful witness to the gospel while being indifferent to the situation of the hungry, the sick, the victims of human inhumanity.”** (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (1989), 136.). Lesslie Newbigin aligns closely with William Temple in his understanding of the church’s role for the world. We are here to make an impact on the world.

Last Sunday, from 1 Corinthians 12, we learned that as we honor and cherish the weaker parts of the body, we can overcome any conflicts and challenges at the church. Our attitude toward the world has to be the same. As we focus on the hungry, the sick, and the victims of human inhumanity, the church can be more strengthened and splendid, spreading the aroma of Jesus Christ.

**Second, as we strive to be a church for non-members, there will be times when we face misunderstanding, rejection, and even mockery.**

Please know that that is part of our calling to build a community for nonmembers. **“At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses.**

The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.'" (Luke 14:17-20 NRSV)

Rejection and suffering are a part of our destiny as a community for nonbelievers. That is why Apostle Paul says, "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." (Colossians 1:24 NRSV). That is why our mission can be defined as "Our participation in God through the suffering of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the end that God be glorified in the nations and in all of his creation." Scott Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission* (2013), 173.

As we go through suffering, we will be sanctified and become more like Jesus Christ. "And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4 NRSV)

**Lastly, we are not supposed to stop inviting people to the great Kingdom feast with our Lord.**

Let us read the Scripture on the screen together. "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.'" (Luke 14:21b-23 NRSV)

Can you feel Jesus' compassionate heart from the Scripture we just read together for the lost souls in the world? His heart for the lost souls is shown to us in his parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16. There was a vineyard landowner who wanted to hire laborers for his vineyard. He went out early in the morning and hired some. He went out again at around nine o'clock, noon, three o'clock and even five o'clock, and hired laborers throughout the day. This demonstrates God's passion and compassion for those who are lost.

In Jerusalem, by the Sheep Gate there was a pool called 'Bethesda." There Jesus healed a man who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus was criticized because it was a Sabbath day. This is what Jesus said to them. "My Father is still working, and I also am working." (John 5:17 NRSV).

We are entering into the Thanksgiving and Advent Season. We plan to do different kinds of servant ministries in and through our church. Let us remember

that we are the church for nonmembers. If you know anyone who has been disconnected from our church, please reach out to them and encourage their return.

Let me close my sermon by showing our church's welcoming sign. Do you remember this sign we always use during our fellowship time? I really enjoyed the delicious food at the Game Day event. Two weeks ago, when we had Game Day at the church, two inmates and a police officer joined us. They arrived much earlier than the time they were supposed to be there to help set up tables for blood tests from United Way. It was lunchtime, and the police officer said, "We're going to be around, but don't be bothered by us." So, I asked Kim to invite them to join us for lunch. She replied, "Pastor, that's exactly what we're here for." We had lunch together, and everyone at Game Day was very friendly and loving toward the inmates.

The following day, three inmates came to church. Since I knew one of them was a coffee drinker, I served them coffee. They enjoyed it, and I could see the big smiles on their faces.

Let us remember that we are called to be a community for everyone, including non-members. Let us remain faithful to this calling.