

Luke 14:12-24

“Focus on the Mission 1: *An Open Community of Christians*”

August 21, 2011 Maple Grove UMC

The mission statement of Maple Grove Church is this: “to be an open community of Christians who love God and serve our neighbors.” It’s a good mission statement, short enough to memorize, scripturally based in Luke 10:27, and I thought it would be helpful as we start our ministry together to take three Sundays and focus on each part of that mission:

- First today, “to be an open community”
- Next Sunday, “who love God”
- And finally, “and serve our neighbors.”

A mission statement tells in a few words what you’re about, what your purpose is, what above all God has called you to do. Abraham Lincoln’s mission was “to preserve the Union.” Mother Teresa’s mission was “to care for the dying.” Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly”—that’s a mission statement. These people may have done many things and engaged in various activities, but it was always clear what their *mission* was, because your mission is at the heart of everything you do.

I struggled at first with Maple Grove's mission statement because a mission statement is meant to tell what you *do*, not just who you *are*. Sure, to love God, and to serve our neighbors—those are things you *do*. But “to be an open community of Christians”—that seemed more like something you *are* than what you *do*. But . . .the more I thought about it, the more I studied the scriptures, and the more I prayed about it, the more I have come to see that an open community isn't just who you are. An open community is something you have to *do*.

To be an open community is to foster diversity, to welcome people non-judgmentally, in the current United Methodist jargon, to be an open community means to practice “radical hospitality.” Jesus knew the human tendency to welcome mostly the similar, the comfortable, those who share your own age range, income bracket, social values, and skin color. That's why he had to teach us that when you throw a party, don't invite your friends or brothers and sisters or relatives or rich neighbors. No, no, he said, when you throw a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed.

In the next scene, someone who'd been invited to a banquet looked around the room, apparently pretty satisfied with himself and the company he was

keeping. He said, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God." But in Jesus' story, the expected guests all beg off, and the invitations go farther and farther out. First, once again to the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame," but then all the way out to the highways and byways. Who knows what kind of people are out there? Compel them all to come in, Jesus says. An open community is something you *do*.

Peter Storey, the courageous Methodist bishop in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid, writes that some people "tell us that following Jesus is a simple matter of inviting Jesus into our hearts. But when we do that," Storey says, "Jesus always asks, 'May I bring my friends?' And when we look at them, we see that they are not the kind of company we like to keep. The friends of Jesus are the outcasts, the marginalized, the poor, the homeless, the rejected—the lepers of life." We hesitate and ask, 'Jesus, must we really have them too?' Jesus replies, 'Love me, love my friends!'"¹ An open community is something you do.

That the church should be an open community is a frequent theme of the New Testament. From the very beginning Jesus got in trouble for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. The church was born on the day of Pentecost, when Jews of every nation and language under the sun received the Holy Spirit

together, and before long they were baptizing Ethiopian eunuchs, despised Samaritans, and even full-fledged Gentiles. When in chapter 7 the Book of Revelation describes the worship that goes on in heaven, it tells of a great multitude, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” This theme of an open community culminates in Paul’s words to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (3:28). The Christian community was open from the very beginning.

Now some people think that all this emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness in the church reflects secular rather than Christian values, that it’s just a form of political correctness. But there are at least two theological reasons for celebrating and promoting diversity in the church. First, Jesus himself always cared most for outsiders—for foreigners, the persecuted, the troubled, the outcast. These were Jesus’ people, and to the extent that we are Christians, these are our people too. And second, the diversity of the church is a witness to the power of Christ. If everyone in the church is pretty much the same, the world will think we’ve come together because of our similarity, that it’s our common interests that bind us together. But if the church consists of people of various races and education levels and lifestyles and political views, then the world will

look at the church and say, "Wow! The only thing these people have in common is Jesus—he must have something going on after all!"

Fred Craddock tells how his family lost their farm when he was a little kid, and moved into a tiny house on a dirt street in the wrong section of a little town. They had no inside plumbing, no electricity and the toilet was out back. "We were," he says, "poor as Job's turkey and having a rough time." His sister was entering high school at the time, and she had trouble with her complexion. She was poor, her face was pock-marked, and she was a new kid at school. Well, you know how that would be. . .

One day in the mail his sister got an invitation from Cullen Lyle to a slumber party. Cullen was the prettiest girl in high school. Her dad was a wealthy businessman, and they lived up on Main Street, and his sister got an invitation to her slumber party. She spoke of the importance of that invitation after she was seventy years old. You might even say it changed her life.

"If you are poor," Craddock concludes, "and exclude prosperous people because you think they're too proud, or if you're prosperous and exclude the poor—you have a right to do that," he says, "but it's not church."ⁱⁱ An open community isn't just who you are, it's what you do.

Now that's most of it—the Bible expects *all* kinds of people to be one in Christ, that it's not really church if not everyone is welcome. But let me share with you one more thing—a harder thing, perhaps—that it means to be an open community.

Did you notice how Jesus' stories in today's Gospel reading are all about *invitations*? Jesus doesn't give instructions about what to serve at your banquet or how to decorate for your party or how to organize your banquet committee; he tells you whom to *invite*. And again the message of the parable isn't what kind of music to play or which snacks to serve, but this: if the first people you invite don't come, invite other people; and if even they don't come, keep on inviting people—any kind of people--until the house is full. Being an open community isn't just about what sort of people you're willing to invite; it's about whether you're willing to invite anyone *at all*.

I have a theory about the decline of the so-called Mainline Denominations, United Methodists among them. Some people think we've lost members because our worship isn't hip enough. Others say we've lost members to churches with more conservative theology or because we've focused too much on social issues. There may be something to those things. But here's what I think happened:

somewhere along the line, about 30 or 40 ago, we Methodists stopped inviting people to know Christ and be part of his church. I don't know whether we got embarrassed about it or assumed everyone already knows they're welcome or what. But I know people—not here, of course, but other places—who have been part of the church all their lives, people who love the church dearly and support it with their time and money, but who haven't invited anyone to the banquet in years . . . and years. It doesn't do much good for everybody to be welcome if no one is invited. Being an open community isn't just what you are, it's what you *do*.

Let me tell you a story. A few weeks ago I was invited to a picnic after worship by a Maple Grove member, a senior citizen who's gone out of his way to help me feel welcome here. He'd invited some other people from church, members of an informal group he's part of. He'd also invited some relatives and several of his neighbors. I had a wonderful time—the food was delicious and it was a great chance to get acquainted with people. But here's what I want to tell you about it: among the neighbors he'd invited was a couple who just moved in across the street from him, two women—two women, not sisters, living together. Well, I made my assumptions. Now, I don't know the convictions of everyone there

about that issue; in fact, I don't know the convictions of anyone there about it.

And I don't need to. But here's what I do know: everyone there accepted them, greeted them warmly, welcomed them. And not only were the neighbors accepted, they had been *invited*—specifically and personally.

And I want to tell you—my heart swelled with pride! For I am the pastor of a church where being an open community is not just what we are, it's what we do, it's our mission. Thanks be to God!

And that is a focus on the first part of our mission statement. Next week: to love God. I can hardly wait!

ⁱⁱ Peter Storey, "Love Me, Love My Friends!" *Alive Now* (Nov/Dec 2009), 49.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 69.