

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
June 1, 2025**

“Praying for a Miracle”
Text: Luke 17:20-26

A man was stranded on a deserted island for many years. When he had given up hope that he would ever be rescued, a boat landed on the shore and a team came to rescue him. The team was curious how he had survived all those years on the island. He explained his daily routines and how he acquired food and water that he needed.

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It isn't a great joke, but it does illustrate a deep truth. Throughout my years of ministry there have been countless reasons people have left the church and vowed to never come back. No matter what the reason, I always feel bad when someone leaves. I recall one incident in which a parishioner was upset about the Easter schedule. During the announcements, Ned stood and expressed his disappointment for all to hear. After having his say, he stormed out of the church, slammed the old wooden doors for an exclamation point to his anger. I had to take a moment to compose myself. I took a quiet moment, a deep breath and then continued.

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I had not prepared anything, but I spoke from the heart. I said that it wasn't my desire that anyone leave the denomination. Not him. Not me. Not my LGBTQ neighbors who are equally beloved children of God. Separation may be inevitable, but I believe in the hard, messy, frustrating work of unity. I believe in this because it is what Jesus prayed for in the garden. And I believe that when Jesus spoke the words of that prayer, he was looking at that group of believers who had assembled to follow him. And I believe he was looking down through history, thinking of the United Methodist Church. And I believe he was focused enough to be also thinking of every particular church, including ours.

In those final hours of freedom, Jesus took his disciples to a garden to pray. It is always interesting to be able to eavesdrop on the prayer of someone else. But I think Jesus wanted them to hear these words. They were important enough that he spoke them aloud so that we would hear them thousands of years later.

He begins with a big request. He prays that his disciples might be united. Perhaps this is the result of knowing the diversity of those he had assembled. The people who followed Jesus were beautiful, complex and diverse people. Were it not for Jesus, these followers would have likely had nothing to do with one another. But in his ministry of love, they found a place for their own acceptance and were encouraged to welcome one another. In their time together, they had watched Jesus draw the circle wider and wider as he continued to welcome diverse people into the fold. And he never seemed to know when to stop.

I would love to have been a fly on the wall when Jesus spoke those words. He prayed that these people around him that night might be united as one. If they were praying along with him, this is the point at which I imagine them opening their eyes and looking around. Maybe their thoughts were doubtful, thinking, "he wants me to be friends with them!" Or maybe their thoughts were a matter of realization, looking around and realizing what Jesus had already accomplished. Because sometimes when we are in a situation where we become united with someone, we see the things that bring us together more than the places where we differ. It doesn't make the differences go away, but we discover that there are more important things.

In 2004 Carol Mayorga settled in a small town of Kennett, Missouri. She was seeking a new beginning, fleeing an abusive family situation. This was her chance to begin anew. And in the two decades, she has found a her place. She has become a beloved member of that community. She is a mother of three young children, a self-described soccer mom, driving her children and their friends to their sporting events. She is active in her church. Carol was a waitress at the John's Waffle and Pancake House and knew her regular customers by name.

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But it just isn't true. What we come to see, instead, is that that immigrant who we were told to fear, who was said to be evil, is nothing like that. She is the woman who drove our kids to soccer practice. She was sitting alongside us in church and volunteering at the local charities. She was not a criminal, but the kind waitress at the local pancake house and welcomed us with a kind smile as she pours a fresh cup of coffee. She was and is someone we know by name and love.

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Although there may not be a singular word or phrase to describe such unity, there are many ways of recognizing it. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. In more modern terms we call it the Beloved Community. It is the recognition of people living and working together in harmony, working for the well-being of all people, inviting people into the space of belonging and acceptance.

Father Richard Rohr put it this way. He wrote, “If a social order allows and encourages, and even mandates, good connectedness between people and creation, people and events, people and people, then you have a truly sacred culture: the Reign of God.”

At the end of this week, eleven individuals representing this congregation will board a plane to Guatemala. Among the things we will be doing while there is helping to build a cafeteria for a local middle school. We will be adding to the work of previous teams and those who follow after us will complete the project. But we will do our part to make a space where local children can gather around tables, where friendships can be nurtured, where bodies, minds and spirits can be fed. And I want to reiterate that we are going on behalf of this congregation. It is not for our own praise, but an outreach of this congregation that desires to make a positive difference here in our community and around the world. This is a tangible example of that. It is all of us working together that makes this possible.

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One of the rescuers noticed that he had built three structures just beyond the beach. They asked him about them and he replied that the first one was his home. The second one, he pointed out was his church. Curious that he didn't say anything about the third structure the rescue team asked about it. With a scowl on his face, the man replied, “That's where I used to go to church. I got mad and vowed I would never go back there.”

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During the opening hymn, I saw the church doors open once again. Ned had returned. He walked to his pew and said something to his wife before leaving again. I didn't know what he said until after the service. Ned had returned because he wanted his life to walk out with him. She simply said to him that he was the one who left the church, not her and she was staying. She continued singing the opening hymn and Ned departed a second time, this time more quietly. I should note that following the service, one of the wise leaders of the church walked to his home and spoke with Ned. Things were patched up and Ned was back at church the next Sunday.

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I had not prepared anything, but I spoke from the heart. I said that it wasn't my desire that anyone leave the denomination. Not him. Not me. Not my LGBTQ neighbors who are equally beloved children of God. Separation may be inevitable, but I believe in the hard, messy, frustrating work of unity. I believe in this because it is what Jesus prayed for in the garden. And I believe that when Jesus spoke the words of that prayer, he was looking at that group of believers who had assembled to follow him. And I believe he was looking down through history, thinking of the United Methodist Church. And I believe he was focused enough to be also thinking of every particular church, including ours.

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