

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

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
October 1, 2023**

“An EPIC Church: Every Person Is Connected To Each Other”
Text: Matthew 14:13-21

This morning we build on the sermon series we began last week. It is about being an EPIC Church. And by epic, I don't mean something that is necessarily heroic or extraordinary. Although it sounds daunting to say that we want to be an epic church, what I mean by that is quite simple. I am using the word EPIC to stand for Every Person is Connected. In a society of such disconnection or isolation and loneliness, maybe it is heroic or extraordinary to think of a place where every person is connected. Hoosier author Dr. Will Miller has written, “I've slowly come to the conclusion that the core emotional problem of modern life is this: a pervasive detachment and aloofness from other people.”

That is what we are up against. The church is a place that seeks something different. We are working to be a place where we are connected to one another. We strive to be a beloved community, with all the fullness of those words. Beloved. Recognizing the goodness and beauty within ourselves and within those around us. And a community. A genuine gathering of people who care for one another amid the joys and sorrows of life. That is what I mean by an EPIC Church. A place where we are deeply rooted in the presence of God and connected to one another in meaningful ways.

Let us begin with prayer: **Welcoming God, on this World communion Sunday, give us eyes to recognize your reflection in the eyes of all your children. Give us a mind to accept and celebrate our differences. Give us a heart big enough to love one another. We thank you for setting a table with space enough for us all. Amen.**

Sixteen-year-old Natalie Hampton knows what it is like to be excluded. She didn't fit in with her classmates. In an interview, she described the loneliness she experienced, particularly in the school cafeteria. She said, “When you walk into the lunchroom and you see all the tables of everyone sitting there and you know that going up to them would only end in rejection, you feel extremely alone and extremely isolated, and your stomach drops. And you are searching for a place to eat, but you know that if you sit by yourself, there'll be so much embarrassment that goes with it because people will know, and they'll see you as the girl who has nowhere to sit. So, there's so many awful feelings that come with it.” This was Natalie's experience day after day in the school cafeteria. You can imagine that rather than looking forward to the break from classes, she experienced the lunch period with great anxiety. Day after day she ate alone.

Eventually, it reached a point where it was too much to bear. Natalie transferred schools. In this new school, she made new friends and found the community she was looking for. Lunch was no longer to be dreaded as a reminder that she didn't fit in with her classmates.

One might expect that this would be the end of the story. But Natalie is a thoughtful young lady. She felt a responsibility to the other students who were going through what she had experienced. If she didn't do something to improve the situation, then in her mind, she was no better than those who excluded her. She came up with a solution that helped not only the students in her school, but around the world.

Natalie created an app for smart phones called, "Eat With Me." How it works is that students can indicate that they are welcoming others to join them. If you don't have a table to sit at or you don't know where to sit, you can use this app to identify open seats and welcoming people. Students no longer have to face that awkward moment of asking if they can sit at a table and face rejection. This app enables users to know where the safe places are.

I suspect we have all faced that feeling of loneliness and isolation in the midst of a gathering of people. Whether it is in the lunchroom or a social event or even in church. We are surrounded by people, but we feel alone. We are longing for a meaningful connection, a friendly face, a welcoming presence, but we feel alone.

One of the unusual things about our recent trip to Scotland and Ireland was the unexpected interactions we had along the way. In the airport, while waiting for our connecting flight, Diane and I had some time to kill. We went to a nearby restaurant to get a drink. After we got our wine, we looked around and realized there was nowhere to sit. A family sitting at a table invited us over. They were waiting for the same flight. We talked about where we were going and what we were planning to do. They were going to Scotland because their son was getting married. We talked about our homes and learned some interesting things to do in the San Diego area. It was just a nice time together.

Then a few days later we were in a nice seafood restaurant in Scotland. The man sitting at the table next to us was alone. We struck up a conversation and learned that he was on a holiday from his work in England. One of his interests was traveling to the farthest points in the United Kingdom. He had been to the southernmost point, the northernmost point and this was his turn to visit the westernmost point. His wife was from County Cork in Ireland, and he gave us her card to help with some genealogy.

Later in Ireland, we were invited to a home where the host shared stories of her family and the community, things to see and do. We had intended to get an early start that day, but we spent well past an hour chatting.

Nowhere in our itinerary did we say that we were planning to get to know other travelers or locals. But it was one of the unexpected surprises of this trip. Just as physical food nourishes our bodies, friendships and interactions nourish our spirits.

One cannot miss, in reading the gospels that Jesus was about bringing people together. He was frequently found around the table interacting with people. He was working to include those who were on the fringes, bringing them back into the community. So much of his ministry was about

building that Beloved Community, where all God's people found the relationships that nourished their health and well-being.

This morning's gospel reading indicates that Jesus was tired. He withdrew to a quiet place to be alone. It was a much-needed respite. But folks heard about where he was. Even in that isolated place they followed him. And it is worth noting that Matthew tells us that when he saw the people, he had compassion for them. He saw their needs. Rather than being upset that he wasn't getting the break he expected, he saw the needs and responded. He healed them. He taught them. He interacted with them well into the evening. Despite the fact that this story begins by saying that Jesus was tired, he gives what he can to those other tired souls who have followed him.

His own disciples pull him aside to tell him that it is getting late. They are far from everyone's home and there isn't enough food to feed them all. They want Jesus to pronounce the benediction and send everyone home. But Jesus has other ideas. He tells them not to send the people away. And then he says to the disciples, "You give them something to eat."

As if to make a point, they tell him that they have only five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Hardly a meal for all of them, much less the thousands that have gathered. It seems to be plenty for Jesus. He tells them to have the crowd to be seated. He blesses the meager portions and tells the disciples to distribute what there is. And we know what happens next. Everyone is fed. There is enough for the thousands of people, plus there were plenty of leftovers.

I know we have talked about this story on several occasions. It is a meaningful story of blessings, of abundance, of God's miraculous works among us. It is about all of that and more. And plenty of scholars have spent lots of time and energy trying to explain how this miracle took place. The truth is no one knows. It just happened. The biblical writers didn't try to explain it. They just told us what happened.

But I think there is something more that is equally mysterious. What happens next is that Jesus dismissed the crowd. He had the disciples get in a boat and he went away to pray. But here is what strikes me. I find myself thinking about the people walking home. They had just sat down together for a meal. They had looked at one another and interacted with one another as they ate. Now as they made their way home, I would like to imagine that the conversations continued. I would like to believe that the people who sat down together walked together and talked together and that maybe those friendships continued well beyond that day. The miracle that took place was not limited to that particular day, in that particular place. The miracle was that strangers became friends, people were connected, new relationships began around that meal.

What happened in that isolated place, is what Jesus wants to happen in this holy place. People are brought together, and he meets us with compassion. He invites us all, different as we are, to gather around a common table. He calls us friends. He calls us family. And we share a meal. But what happens is that we become a community of care. We become connected to one another. We rejoice together in good times. We share one another's burdens and sorrows. We weep together in times of loss and sadness. That is what Jesus created in that miraculous meal and it is what continues to this day.

Every time we gather, part of the work we do is to strengthen the bonds for one another. Whether it is the United Methodist Women's group, the youth group, the choir or bell choir, a shared study, a small group, a Sunday School class. Embedded within all these gatherings is an important connection being built. There are a couple of new things that I want to encourage you to consider.

In a sermon in September, Pastor Harriet mentioned the caregiving ministry to our shut-ins. Like any church, we have some members who can no longer attend due to health or other circumstances. We don't want to overlook them. So, Harriet is putting together visitation teams to keep that connection to these members. The first session for these parish visitors will be Monday October 16th. It is an important part of keeping our connections strong.

Another new ministry is an online prayer email. With the changes in the local paper, it is possible that folks may not always know when there has been a death in the parish. And by the time it makes it to the printed paper, the funeral may have already passed. I am planning to send emails to those who would like to receive it with information about any death or hospitalization or other prayer concern. Our prayers are part of that vital connection we have as a community.

Every Person Is Connected. We are a holy community, united by God's love. The ability to bring people together, to include those who are lonely and isolated, to extend God's hospitality is an essential part of what it means to be the church. I cannot say for certain, but I suspect that if Jesus had a cell phone, he would download the "Eat With Me" app developed by Natalie Hampton. And there would always be room around his table. I suspect that if Jesus lived in our community, he would have compassion upon all people and work to bring them together in meaningful ways. Isn't that what the church does when it is at its best? We follow Jesus' example and make room for others around this great big banqueting table, where all are fed, all are welcome, all are loved.