

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 21, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: John 11:1-7, 17-45

Theme: The Art of Hospitality: The Three Questions

[prayer]

In February the Pew Research Center published its third Religious Landscape Survey. Since 2007 this survey has painted a statistical portrait of our nation's religious landscape. The percentage of Americans who identify as Christian is 62%, a sixteen-point drop from almost two decades ago when 78% of Americans identified as Christian. Within that 62%, there is a stark generational difference: Only 46% aged 18-24 identify as Christian, compared to 80% of those 74 years or older. Only 25% of young Americans attend religious services at least monthly; 27% pray daily. Forty-three percent identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹

Generational replacement is the biggest factor driving church closure. As older, more religious Americans die, the younger generations succeeding them are less religious. While some churches are bucking this trend, most congregations reflect this generation gap, including Community UMC (although we have made some improvement). The most important thing our Resilient Church Team learned during our two-year Resilient Church Project was this: A resilient church prioritizes passing the faith onto the next generation. This is how the Church writ-large has survived for two thousand years through all kinds of existential crises.

I want to be clear that just because a young person may not identify as Christian, that does not mean they are not spiritual or open to learning about Jesus Christ. My experience of young people is that they are very spiritually curious. The key is responding to that curiosity in ways they can relate to. When the church gets too comfortable with itself or too invested in "the way things have always been done," then we stop paying attention and adapting to our mission field, and before we

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>

know it our community has changed around us. The good news of Jesus never changes but our mission field does. Disciples of Jesus are always seeking to see and welcome new people into God's kingdom.

Last week I preached that the art of hospitality begins with the ministry of noticing people. This week we are wrapping up our series by considering how hospitality and evangelism are two sides of the same coin. Every church likes to think they are a welcoming church. But truly hospitable churches understand that hospitality is more than being friendly and helpful. Truly hospitable churches know that hospitality is an opportunity to be evangelists for Christ, to invite people into a relationship with Jesus. This is why we practice and lean into the value of radical hospitality: So that people can come to know who Jesus is.

To be truly hospitable disciples of Jesus, we must always be asking ourselves three questions:

- Why do people need Jesus?
- Why do people need the Church?
- Why do people need *our* church?

If we don't know the answers to these questions, then we are missing the "why" behind our hospitality and church becomes just a social club. At its core, biblical hospitality is a response to the good news we have experienced in our lives because of Jesus. We respond to this good news by sharing it with other people!

Jesus sums this good news up in today's Scripture lesson: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (vv. 25-26 CEB)

Jesus makes Martha two promises. He promises her that if she believes in him, she will experience both resurrection and life. These are two different things. Death is an unavoidable reality. But by raising Lazarus from the dead Jesus demonstrates, as the incarnate Word of God, that God has given him creative power over death. Lazarus's resurrection foreshadows Jesus's resurrection, and Jesus's resurrection foreshadows our own. "You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put

my breath in you, and you will live” (Ezk 37:13-14 CEB). When Jesus says he is the resurrection, he is promising us that death is not the end of our stories...life is.

And that life is more than just life beyond the grave spent in eternity with God. Jesus declares that *he* is life. Those who believe he is the incarnate Word of God will experience the blessings of eternity right here and right now. We experience these blessings through the transformational effects of Jesus’s love and grace in our lives. As this love and grace transforms us, we experience the kingdom of God not as a distant promise but in real time. What God wills for the world – mercy, justice, peace, new life, all the things we pray for when we say the Lord’s Prayer – these things are available to us in and through Christ right now.

As Wesleyan Christians we believe that when we make disciples of Jesus the world is transformed into the kingdom of God one person at a time. When we surrender ourselves to God, declare Jesus as Lord of our lives, and receive the Holy Spirit, we become new creatures in Christ, witnesses of God’s power, and conduits of His love. If we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, then we believe that God is already working the miracle of new life here and now. God has breathed God’s Spirit into us so that the everyday rhythms of our lives are imbued with this resurrection power.

We do not need to be afraid of suffering and death because we have been assured victory over death through Christ. We also do not need to be afraid of sin and evil because we have been assured victory over those things, too. As we surrender ourselves to Christ and align our hearts with his, we become more capable of resisting sin and more courageous in the face of evil.

Debi Nixon writes, “The need for unconditional grace and mercy, the need to believe that there’s hope for the future, the need to know that in the darkest moments of our lives the darkness will not prevail – we can’t find anywhere else but in Jesus Christ.”² To believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world is to confess our hope that God is somehow present in the worst moments of our lives, at our deepest points of suffering, when our grief and pain is the most overwhelming and isolating. The miracle of God’s love

² *The Art of Hospitality Companion Book: A Practical Guide for a Ministry of Radical Welcome, Revised Edition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2024), 66-67.

revealed in Jesus alters how we relate to life and to death. Now we have faith that God is with us in both.

Are we convinced that Jesus can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart? Do we believe that Jesus and his Way are the solution to the most serious problems that plague our world?

When we extend biblical hospitality, we are not inviting people to join a religious club. We are inviting people to recognize they have deep spiritual needs that only Jesus can satisfy. We must be convinced that Jesus is good news worth sharing! We must believe that faith in Jesus has made a difference in our lives and that it can make a difference in our neighbors' lives, too. And we must be prepared to bear witness, to give our testimony, to tell the story of how Jesus has changed us.

This testimony is personal, but it is not private. Next week on Laity Sunday we are going to hear testimonies from three members of our congregation. They are going to tell you why faith in Jesus is important to them and the difference it has made in their lives. The best way to share the good news of Jesus is to share the authentic story of what Jesus has done for each of us. Your story is all you need to be an evangelist for Christ. No gimmicks, no flashy conversion tale, no fancy words – just authentic you who has felt your heart “strangely warmed” (as John Wesley would put it) by the love of God.

That experience of love was compelling enough that you wanted a relationship with Christ. And that relationship led you to be in relationship with other people who know Christ. We call this community, this fellowship, the Church.

We frequently misunderstand the church as a building where we worship. But the church is simply an assembly of people with Christ at their center. Jesus said to Peter, “I’ll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won’t be able to stand against it” (Matt 16:18 CEB).

That rock was ordinary people like Peter and the other disciples. And Jesus declares that when the Church is gathered, when believers are in community with each other, not even Hell can prevail against them. Jesus knew there is tremendous power in community. Our Scripture says that when Mary knelt at Jesus’s feet weeping, and he saw the sadness of Lazarus’s friends and family,

Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (v. 33 NRSVUE). Jesus was moved by the compassionate community gathered around Mary and Martha in their grief.

This compassionate community is just as miraculous as Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Compassion literally means “to suffer with.” *With* is how God has chosen to relate to us in Jesus Christ. And *with* is also how God calls us to relate to each other. “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). “Encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thess 5:11). “Stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together” (Heb 10:24-25).

Why do people need the Church? Because we need each other. We are meant to follow Jesus alone. Like Mary and Martha, we need a community to show up, offer care and support, carry the torch of hope for us when we can’t do it ourselves, and bear witness with us to the miracle of Jesus’s resurrection power in our lives. We are discipled through relationships – a relationship with Jesus and relationships with each other. In the Church we challenge and inspire one another, hold each other accountable, and keep the faith for the next generations. The Church was never intended to be an audience of people consuming the worship service and then going their separate ways. The Church is a community of people committed to each other’s discipleship. We are the Body of Christ on the earth, proclaiming the message of good news for all people by continuing the ministry that Jesus began.

This leaves us with our third and final question: Why do people need *our* church? Why should someone follow Jesus here at Community UMC rather than another community of believers?

This is the most difficult of the three questions to answer. Churches have an unfortunate habit of seeing each other as competition rather than uniquely called missionary outposts for God’s kingdom. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:14-16 CEB). No church can be all things to all people. But we can be what God has

uniquely called us to be in this time and place. What is the unique calling of CUMC? Who are we uniquely called to serve and extend biblical hospitality to?

Our purpose as a church has always been the same: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. But the way this purpose has been expressed and lived out has changed with each generation of saints that has passed through this community in our more than 140 years of ministry. We are currently in a season of discerning and redefining our vision for the next generation. The Coeur Team is eager to do this work, but first we want to hear from you. Today you were given a notecard. On that notecard we would like you to answer this question: *Why Community UMC? Why do people in our community need our church? Why might someone want to be part of our church?*

Try writing down at least one thing you think is compelling about our faith community. If you have been a longtime member of CUMC, perhaps think back to the thing (or things) that drew you to be part of this church in the first place. If you are new to CUMC or visiting, we would love to hear about what you are looking for in a faith community. Once you have written your answer (or answers) down, put your notecard in the offering plate or give it to an usher when you leave today. If you need more time to think and pray, feel free to take your card home with you and bring it back next Sunday.

We believe that people need Jesus. We believe that people need the church. And we believe that there are people in our community we have not met yet who need *our* church. God has planted us here for a purpose and that purpose is not yet complete. Let's name and claim the amazing work that God is calling us to as United Methodists in Coeur d'Alene. Let's continue to be a city on a hill, a lamp on a lampstand, a beacon of hope and hospitality to our neighbors, speaking "the wonderful acts of the one who has called [us] out of darkness and into his amazing light" (1 Pet 2:9).

Let us pray: God, through your son, Jesus Christ, we desire to be your church. We recognize that first we must individually yield our lives to be transformed by your love, so we give our lives to you. Give us a bold vision for the ministry and mission you have called us to do as a church, and give us the passion to pursue it. Help us

to see others as you see them. Make us instruments of your peace, mercy, justice, and welcome to all in our community. Amen.³

³ Prayer by Debi Nixon. Ibid 87.