

“I’m Not Like Other People”

Sermon Manuscript

Text Reading: **Luke 18:9-14**

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

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12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Introduction Story

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On November 14, 1960, a little girl named Ruby Bridges walked up the stairs of William Frantz Elementary School. On her first day of first grade, she wore a beautiful dress. Maybe some of us can remember dropping off a child for their first day of school. Or maybe we can remember our own first day of school. That is usually a day of excitement and nervousness for us. It's safe to say, though, that none of us had a first day of school quite like Ruby. As Ruby climbed those steps on her first day, she was

accompanied by four US marshals who escorted her past the mob of white protesters who had gathered to hurl insults and threats against this six-year-old.

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When Ruby entered the school, she was taken to the principal's office while the mob rushed inside to pull out the other children—500 in all. Ruby would be the only student in her class that year.

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Each morning and afternoon, Ruby faced that crowd of angry people, yelling at her, carrying a coffin with a baby doll in it, and throwing things.

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All of this was because Ruby was the first African-American to attend a previously all-white school in Louisiana, six years after segregation in public schools was deemed unconstitutional.

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A six-year-old girl was labeled unclean, subhuman, disgusting, without value, and wretched by people who viewed themselves as holy, righteous, valuable, and pure. It's heartbreaking to realize that many of those in that crowd also considered themselves followers of Jesus. It's a sobering reminder to us of how easy it can be to lose sight of His example when fear and pride take root.

What Is Othering?

Definition and Setup

Our text comes from Luke's Gospel. It is found at the end of a group of parables that Luke has compiled for us. Immediately following it, we get the story of the little children coming to Jesus and Jesus elevating them, even as the disciples try to rebuke them. Jesus used stories to teach in ways that go beyond simple head-knowledge. It's one thing for us to be told how we should live; it's another to be shown. Our brains are wired to learn through stories. This is one of the reasons why I opened with this modern-day story.

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Present in this horrific story from our not-so-distant past is a tremendous example of "othering."

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Othering is a term defined as the setting up of a hierarchy of humanity, particularly with myself and those I categorize as like me at a higher level than those who aren't like me. Othering is a mentality of "Us versus Them." Charles Bellinger says it like this in his book on Othering: "Othering defines and secures one's own identity by distancing and stigmatizing an(other). Its purpose is to reinforce notions of our own 'normality,' and to set up the differences of others as a point of deviance. The person or group being 'othered' experiences this as a process of marginalization, disempowerment and social exclusion." He also frames it like this: "A person's *self-image* is formed through the mental act of *othering*. 'I' gain a sense of who 'I' am by convincing myself that I am *not the other*."

We are told that Jesus addresses this parable to some people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Jesus has a specific audience in mind when He tells this story. He is

leveling this story not at the sinners or the lost, but at the self-righteous. He is pointing this story not at the proverbial tax collectors, but instead the Pharisees. Jesus boldly speaks this truth to people who thought they had it all together — people not so different from us – and instead of applauding their actions, He elevates the broken one and says, Be like them. And now, we get the gift—and challenge—of hearing that same story together today.

Human Nature and Self-Reflection

This is a hard word for us to hear. It's the kind of message that makes us want to put our guard up. This is the message we can listen to and think, "Thank you God, that this message is not for me." And that thought itself reveals how built-in this tendency is. It's human nature to both align with people that are like us and also to miss recognizing the faults within us. As I worked on this sermon, I had to constantly reflect, revisit, and name where othering was happening in my own life. And I imagine many of us might see the same tendency in our own hearts. Even as we read this parable, we risk othering the Pharisee, turning him into our "Them" and missing Jesus' point. We have to find a way to move beyond the grouping and into a humility that allows for radical belonging.

Pharisee's Righteousness

In the parable Jesus tells, the Pharisee is convinced that he is good because of two things. The first aspect is legalistic. He is convinced that he has achieved righteousness through his actions: fasting twice a week and tithing on all he gets. Don't get my intentions twisted here; these are good spiritual practices and even go beyond what was commanded of an Israelite to do. The actions are not the problem. However, these are set in contrast to the actions of others. This is the second aspect of the Pharisee's self-righteousness: he sees himself as better than the others.

Sometimes we discover who we are by comparing ourselves to who we're not — and that's where pride can quietly slip in. He says I am not like other people. I'm not like the thieves, I'm not like the rogues, I'm not like the adulterers. And I'm definitely not like this tax collector. Of course, what is implied by the distinction he makes is not simply one of difference. He's not only saying my actions and behaviors are different from these other people, he's implying that there is a hierarchy of human value, a ladder of righteousness of which he has climbed to a higher rung.

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Paul quotes from the Psalms when he says in **Romans 3:10-11**.

10 “as it is written:

“There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who has understanding;
there is no one who seeks God.””

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He then says in verses 22b-25:

22b For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;

There's no ladder of righteousness for us to climb. We all stand in need of grace. There is no place for partially righteous people who can devalue others who fail to live up to their standards.

The Pharisee's assumed inherent value is expressed in the ways that he is juxtaposed with the tax collector. The first is in their titles. Both of these men are in the temple, praying. They are both seeking God. Yet one receives the title Pharisee, and the other is labeled a tax collector.

The Pharisees were especially concerned with ritual purity. They went further than most of their contemporary Jews by applying these standards of purity not just to the temple, but to every aspect of daily life. Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as coming into contention with the Pharisees at numerous instances for valuing mercy and care for the poor and the sinners over maintaining ritual purity.

Tax collectors could be portrayed as the opposite of the Pharisees in some ways. They were generally despised by other Jews, considered immoral, and ritually unclean.

Where the Pharisee was emblematic of ritual purity and righteousness, the tax collector was a common representation of sinners and impurity.

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Temple Setting & Context

The second juxtaposition between the Pharisee and the tax collector is their position within the temple. The Pharisee is described as "standing by himself," and in comparison to the tax collector, who is "standing far off." We can likely deduce that the Pharisee is standing in the Court of Israel, where only ritually clean, Jewish men can enter. This is the last area before the Holy Place, which could only be entered by the priests. Since the tax collector was considered unclean, he would likely be praying in the Court of Gentiles, where the buying and selling of sacrifices and money-changing were occurring. This is a place far removed from where the presence of God was perceived to dwell in the Holy of Holies. In this

juxtaposition, the tax collector is literally presented as farther away from God's presence than the Pharisee is.

The center of the temple was considered the center of God's presence. On the outside were the sinners, tax collectors, Gentiles, women, and the unclean. These people were kept at a distance so as not to defile the presence of God. But Jesus comes to announce a new location for God's presence. God's presence is no longer contained in the temple, but in the incarnation: God become human in Jesus Christ. And through the Holy Spirit, the presence of God will go out to all people after His resurrection. Even though the tax collector stands far from the temple's center, we see in him a heart posture that brings him closer to God.

Presence of God Reframed

Let's listen to another story where Jesus meets a tax collector named Matthew:

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Matthew 9:9-13

9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples.

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11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no

need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Jesus has relocated the presence of God from the Holy of Holies in the temple, where only those with impeccable ritual purity can enter, and brought it directly to those considered the lowest of society. Jesus brings the presence of God across boundary lines to the intimate place of table fellowship with sinners.

Opening Our Eyes

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As we consider what this parable means for us today, we are invited to open our eyes. Did we know we can pray with our eyes open? When I was growing up, I would sometimes peek during prayer, and someone would hiss, "Close your eyes!" I always wondered—how did they know?

This parable presents us with two examples of praying with eyes open, though. Now, Jesus doesn't explicitly tell us about the literal state of their eyes, but He does give us some clues as to where their attention is. The Pharisee prays like this, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." We can almost picture him gesturing with a pointed finger as he prays. He's surveying those in the distance and listing off the people he's better than, finally settling on the worst of the worst: the tax collector.

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We are also told something about the tax collector's vision. Jesus says the tax collector would not even lift his eyes to heaven. Not only is the tax collector avoiding looking at the people around him, but he won't even look up to where God is. The tax collector doesn't try to pick out the people he's better than, and he doesn't even consider himself worthy enough to look

directly at God. He is pictured as beating his breast, which is a sign of deep shame and repentance.

Check out these two images of prayer, then. The Pharisee is praying with his eyes on other people and his finger extended to name their guilt and unworthiness. The tax collector is praying with his eyes on himself and his hand beating his chest in repentance.

Part of opening our eyes is also recognizing our similarities. As Christians, we know that God created all humans in the image of God. We call this the *imago Dei*. Regardless of ethnicity, status, ability, or background, every person bears God's image and infinite worth.

Naming Othering

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After opening our eyes, the next step to overcoming Othering is to name it. This starts with naming our own state. In this parable, the tax collector exemplifies this humble position. He names himself a sinner and asks for mercy from God. He doesn't try to place himself above anyone else. He doesn't try to justify his sin. He doesn't point out sins in the lives of other people. He just asks for mercy.

In this example, the Pharisee also names several things. He first names his self-righteousness brought about by his works. He believes he has earned justification through a legalistic approach that raises his own position by lowering those around him. He doesn't see others as people created and beloved by God, but only by the sins they have committed. This starts first with whole groups of people. Thieves, rogues, and adulterers. By addressing people by titles that mark their sinful actions, the Pharisee is identifying them by their actions. Not only is this a generalization, but this sort of naming puts up barriers of protection, barriers designed to protect the self-righteous from contamination by the unclean. Remember who this parable is addressed to. Jesus tells this

parable to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous *and* regarded others with contempt.” The word “contempt” is translated even harsher as “disgust” in the CEB translation.

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My perspective on this was recently expanded by Richard Beck’s book *Unclean*. Dr. Beck opens the book with a bizarre and thought-provoking experiment. I realize this experiment I’m about to describe is a bit uncomfortable, but I think it helps us see something important. Beck writes, “Imagine spitting into a Dixie cup. After doing so, how would you feel if you were asked to drink the contents of the cup?” Seriously, think about this. You have this saliva inside your mouth, and all day long, we swallow it without even giving it a second thought. What changes physically when you spit into a clean cup and then consider reincorporating it? Nothing, physically. But there is a huge psychological difference between swallowing saliva in your mouth and doing so once it’s gone out of your body. This is what Beck terms “disgust psychology” and expands on it in great detail throughout the book. He describes disgust as primarily a “boundary psychology,” protecting our bodies from incorporating anything perceived as exterior or alien. When it comes to food items, disgust has an important role to play in protecting our bodies from toxins. The problem comes when disgust extends beyond food.

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

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This is the central theme of Richard Beck’s investigation. He connects sacrifice to the purity impulse, which is to create an area of holiness and purity where the clean are allowed and the unclean are expelled. But he places that in tension with the mercy impulse, which engages in hospitality that blurs the lines between clean and unclean, bringing both into contact with each other. This is, of course, most apparent as Jesus, the perfectly Holy One, shares a meal with unclean sinners and tax collectors. Our

disgust psychology moves beyond just food items, and we start to view other people as socially and morally unclean. We begin to see sin and status as contaminations, and permanent ones at that. We draw boundary lines of protection, assuming that if we come into contact with sinners, it is we who will become unclean. When we think this way, we're acting as though sin is more powerful than our Savior.

Our theology can sometimes get stuck in the old patterns of ritual purity, keeping God in the Holy of Holies within the Temple that the high priest can only enter once a year. But Jesus Christ came to overcome all of that. When a woman who had been perpetually bleeding for twelve years touches Jesus, it's not Jesus who is made unclean, but the woman who is cleansed. When Jesus reaches out to touch a leper, it's not Jesus who is made unclean, but the leper who is healed. When Jesus takes the hand of Jairus's daughter, who has died, it's not Jesus who is made unclean, but the girl who is restored. Holiness, then, is not a removal or a physical separation from the world. It is something created within us by the power of the Holy Spirit as a protection that enables us to live missionally. Holiness is not an end in itself, but a means to love properly. We can love others more radically when we stop thinking about ourselves and start thinking about those around us. Holiness means I can extend hospitality to you without turning you into an object to be used. Sin causes us to objectify the other. Sin malforms our relationships with other people. Holiness enables us to engage in relationship with the other without sinning. Holiness becomes the moral protection in the middle of an unclean world.

Jesus addresses this parable to people who look upon others with disgust. To people who are trusting in their own righteousness. And Jesus has the boldness to proclaim that it's not the self-righteous, set-apart, holy people who are justified, but the unclean, repentant sinner.

Who Do We Other?

So who is it that we other?

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The Pharisee names groups of people that he considered unclean, people who were beneath him on the ladder of human value. What sorts of groups might we list in our prayer today? If we're honest, each of us may have someone in mind. Prisoners? The unhoused? Addicts? Immigrants? Gay people? Transgender people? People with disabilities? Muslims? Jews? Hindus? Atheists? People of a different race or ethnicity? Democrats? Republicans? Criminals? Who are the people about whom we would say "never them?" Or "At least I'm not one of those." Where are people of "those" groups allowed to stand in our "temple?"

Will to Embrace

It can be easy for us to hold a group of people at arm's length. It's easier to identify a whole segment of people as unclean or irredeemable based upon whatever is morally repulsive to us. It's harder to do that to someone we love. What happens when we pick out a face from within that group? Our neighbor, our sister, our brother, our son, our daughter, our aunt, our uncle, our child's teacher, our delivery person, the person who picks the apples we eat? Isn't it easier for us to extend welcome and mercy to someone we know and see? This is called the will to embrace. We can set aside our moral repulsion to embrace a sinner that we have determined to love. The phrase, "love the sinner, hate the sin," may come to mind here. Certainly, that's an honorable sentiment, but that can only be attempted when we are truly humble and committed to a will to embrace. Our motivations can't be to fix the sin problem. We must commit to radical hospitality as we extend belonging and eat with sinners and tax collectors.

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In **Luke 10**, we grapple with this:

25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27 He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

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28 And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

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In response to this, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is a very familiar story to us, but do we often really consider the radical nature of what’s depicted? An Israelite is beaten, bloodied, and naked, left on the side of the road. The priest and the Levite come upon this member of their in-group. But they leave him there, not wanting to make themselves ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with the mess. The person exemplified in this parable is the Samaritan—the enemy, the foreigner, the out-group, the other. Only this one is willing to show mercy and compassion to the Israelite. Jesus then asks the expert in the law,

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36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The expert in the law won't even call the Samaritan a Samaritan because he doesn't want to bring the concept of Samaritan and neighbor too close together. Yet, this is Jesus' command. Go and dismantle the boundaries of who is in and who is out through mercy.

Back in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we see the situation that arises when the Pharisee attempts this with the wrong motives. He moves beyond naming groups of others to an individual person that he intentionally distances himself from. He considers himself to be better, more holy than the tax collector, and it is his self-exaltation that brings him low in the Kingdom of God.

Becoming Justified

The next key element highlighted by this parable is the act of becoming justified.

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Dikaïos (dik'-ah-yos) is the root of the Greek words used three times in this passage. It's used in verse 9, translated as righteous. As in, "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." It's used in the negative sense in verse 11, here translated as "rogues," but could also be translated as evildoers or unrighteous. Then it's used once again in verse 14, translated as "justified." As in, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other."

There is then a righteousness sandwich created in the text between those who trusted in themselves for righteousness and the one who trusted in God's mercy for righteousness. By the way, this is just further proof for the teens that everything is a sandwich! So righteousness forms the bread of this sandwich, and what we might call the meat of it is the Pharisee's othering toward the unrighteous.

What is abundantly clear through this parable is that righteousness is not achieved by actions or placing your value above the value of others. Jesus clearly says that “this man” (indicating the humble tax collector) “went down to his home justified rather than the other” (indicating the self-righteous Pharisee). How then is justification or righteousness received? It is through repentance and humility. For us, too, righteousness can’t be earned—it’s received through repentance and humility.

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1 Timothy 1:15-16

15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. 16 But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

Paul refers to himself as the worst sinner. Paul is the flesh and blood example of this parable. The previously self-righteous Pharisee was brought low to seek the mercy of God and received salvation through Christ’s love and forgiveness. Paul knows that he is no better than the other sinners. The only difference between him and other sinners is that Christ has enabled him to see the ignorance of his sinful ways.

I hope that in this message, you don’t hear me justifying sinful behaviors. That is not what I’m saying, and out of context, you could perhaps claim that. Sin is sin. Sin is brokenness that separates us from true and flourishing relationship with others and with God. I am not excusing the sinful behaviors or attitudes of anyone. And if anything today stirs discomfort or questions in our hearts, I’d welcome conversations this week if you’d like to talk and pray through any of this together. I won’t argue right or wrong on individual topics, but we can sit together and help each other better model the life of Jesus.

Nevertheless, I am calling for radical hospitality toward sinners and people the world or the church may label as unclean, untouchable, or the lowest—the kind of hospitality that Jesus modeled. It is only in this kind of welcome that any of us can begin to experience the healing conviction of God's grace. How can we expect anyone to clean themselves up before entering Christ's Church? If that were the standard, none of us would belong. It is only in humility that we can move to a place of belonging.

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Moving Toward Belonging

Belonging is the opposite of othering. This should be our aim as we engage our underlying and often uncontested notions of moral disgust. We must move beyond othering groups of people and individuals under the guise of purity or holiness. Jesus proved to us throughout His ministry that there is another way for holiness to be lived out in this world. It is not through separation and purity barriers, but through radical embrace of the other. Jesus modeled this again and again as He interacted with sinners and those society considered to be garbage or repulsive. Jesus modeled this through humility, expressed even in coming into this world. The Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, could have continued to live a perfectly pure and holy existence apart from the flawed, disgusting, and broken world of sinners. Yet, Jesus lowered Himself to the lowest place, entering into the filth and mortality of human existence, taking on the position of servant of all, and then dying a shameful death as a criminal on a cross, the symbol of imperial oppression, in the middle of a crowd of screaming, self-righteous people who considered themselves God's chosen people.

Yet, before this point of ultimate sacrifice, Jesus models a life of radical hospitality. This is perhaps best exemplified in the Eucharist, the communion meal that Jesus shared with sinners, tax collectors, women, and fishermen. Jesus reclines in this most intimate space, the Passover

feast, with the rejects and discarded people of this world. It is in this moment that Jesus offers us an invitation to belonging. He invites us to transcend the boundaries of disgust psychology as we imagine the bread as His body and the wine as His blood. We all arrive at the table as repentant sinners—people with no righteousness of our own. And Jesus says that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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Closing

Each morning, as Ruby Bridges walked past the screaming crowds into the school, her teacher noticed Ruby mouthing some words. Later, a child psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Coles, asked Ruby what she was saying each morning as she endured the death threats of hundreds of “Christians” who wanted her dead. Ruby responded that she was praying for them. Coles asked her, “Why were you doing that?” “Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don’t you think they need praying for?” Later, Coles said to Ruby, “Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.” She responded, “No, I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to them... I always pray the same thing. ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.’”

What an image of the humility and mercy we’re all called to embody.

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Let’s pray.

I pray now a prayer by Walter Brueggemann, titled “Called beyond Comfort Zone.”

We are among your called.
We have heard and answered your summons.
You have addressed us in the deep places of our lives.
In responsive obedience we testify, as we are able, to your truth as it
concerns our common life.

We thank you for the call,
For the burden of that call,
For the risk that goes with it,
For the joy of words given us by your growing spirit, and
For the newness that sometimes comes from our word.

We have indeed been in the counsel of your summoning spirit,
And so we know some truth to speak.

But we are, as well, filled with rich imagination of our own,
And our imagination is sometimes matched and overmatched
By our cowardice,
By our readiness to please,
By our quest for well-being.

We are, on most days, a hard mix of true prophet and wayward voice,
A mix of your call to justice and our hope for shalom.

Here we are, as we are,
Mixed but faithful,
Compromised but committed,
Anxious but devoted to you.

Use us and our gifts for your newness that pushes beyond all that we can
say or imagine.
We are grateful for words given us;
We are more grateful for your word fleshed among us.

Amen

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Intinction Communion

Today, we are going to respond by receiving Communion. At Life Church, we have an open table, meaning that everyone is welcome to receive the grace of God represented by the gluten-free bread and grape juice. We come not as the righteous, but as those who, like the tax collector, cry out, 'God, be merciful to us, sinners.' Here, at this table, we are made one in Christ. In response to this message of belonging, we are going to do something a little bit differently as we partake together. We have two stations set up in the front, and I'm going to ask that, as you are ready to receive Communion, you line up in the middle two aisles, come forward, receive the bread, and then dip it in the juice (holding it by the very edge so you don't dip your fingers in). Then, you'll eat it right there and return to your seat via the outer aisles to help with the traffic flow. If you would rather receive Communion in your seat, we have someone who will bring it right to you; just raise your hand when you are ready.

"Jesus, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'

In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.'"

Now, come as you are ready, and receive the Lord's Communion.

Prayer after all have been served.

Would you stand in body or spirit as we sing together.

Benediction

Go now into this world that God has created and loves, and break down barriers of hate and disgust as we come into contact with the messiness of people whom God loves unconditionally, not in your own power, but in the power of the Holy Spirit who exhibits the radical belonging of God. Go in peace.