



From the Pulpit: April 21, 2024

8:30 a.m. Youth Sunday

Sarah Champlin

Matthew 25:24–40

What's Saving Your Life Right Now? The Practice of Encountering Others: Community

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

It was this time last year I was finishing up my last semester in seminary. You didn't have to take a chance on hiring me but you did. You also didn't have to throw me on a plane to Puerto Rico on my first day on the job but you did. I don't know if anyone else has had the experience of spending a week-long mission trip with 65 high schoolers that you've never met before in your life—but it is a doozy let me tell you. Baptism by fire. We hit the ground running—long days of construction work in the hot sun, evening field trips to go see the bioluminescent bay, and every night some high-energy worship followed by some of the most moving and reflective small group devotionals I have ever experienced. It was a roller coaster let me tell you. And I can hang okay? This isn't my first mission trip rodeo. But still I was a stranger to these people. In the back of my mind I was half-expecting someone to get up in the middle of worship and point at me and say "She doesn't even go here!!!!" "Who even is she?"

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But the crazy thing was they didn't do that. Not even close. They scooped me up and took me in like I was one of their own, like it was seamless, like it wasn't even a thing. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Jean Vanier, theologian, and founder of the L'Arche intentional communities says "To invite others in is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share."

This is exactly what I saw on the IMPACT mission trip. It is such a strong program with such a treasure of truth and of peace. How can I describe it? Being there feels like a collective release, of all the limiting expectations imposed on us of who we're supposed to be at school, at work, at home. Instead we can inhabit a fuller, freer version of ourselves as God's beloved—and when we relax into that it's so easy to see it in everyone else. Barbara Brown Taylor whose book *An Altar in the World* we are exploring for our sermon series this month, describes this sort of communal encounter as helping to draw us out of ourselves. With volunteering she says "you know that you can arrive back home dirty and tired but also oddly refreshed, with more lift in your heart than you could have gotten from a day at the beach."

She gets it. On the IMPACT Trip we are drawn out of ourselves, which leaves us open to being surprised and delighted by each other, by our surroundings, by the people we meet, by the place we're in. It's palpable and infectious. When you have something like that, there's always room for one more. No problem, come on in, the water's warm. This treasure of truth and peace bubbles over with abundance.

Now if I'm being honest, I consider myself to be something of a community connoisseur. I was blessed to have a transformative youth group experience growing up and ever since then I've been like whoa—whatever that was I need way more of it, forever, and ever. I have spent years living and learning in various kinds of communities—a Buddhist Community Center in Philly, a Christian Farm in Georgia, a soup kitchen in Boston, among others—and I'm chasing the secret. What makes them work? What makes community so special, so essential to our thriving? What is it about our Christian faith that is so deeply tied to the experience of being in community?

Each community I've been a part of has helped me uncover a little more of that secret. I expect this gradual uncovering will turn out to be a lifelong journey but here's what I've learned so far: when we offer space that invites people to be fully, freely themselves—they show us God. Jesus tells us clearly when we feed the hungry—we feed him. When we welcome the stranger—we welcome him. Within every person lies the spark of the divine. Our practice of welcome, of community, helps us draw it out of each other. Christine Pohl another community connoisseur, believes that hospitality is at the heart of Christian

Life, drawing from God's grace. She says that we respond to the welcome that God has offered us and replicate that welcome in the world. When we replicate that welcome, we can't help but see God everywhere.

Our theme for IMPACT this year is Divine Image. We're talking a lot about how we are made

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in the image of God, and thinking about how we are called to live into that divine image in our daily lives. Part of understanding how we ourselves are made in God's image is coming to grips with the realization that so is everyone else. This realization requires us to draw outside of ourselves and recognize each other as subjects, not objects. We must do the difficult spiritual work of truly encountering each other. This means treating each other not as people we can utilize, change, or control, but as full and complete beings that exist outside of their usefulness

to us. When we make space that invites others to be fully themselves, we must do so without the strings of expectations that they will act as some kind of means to our own ends.

Today is Earth Sunday, so you'll allow me to get on my ecological soapbox for a second and suggest that this concept of treating others as subjects is not just limited to the human Other. Trees are subjects too, full, and complete beings in themselves. Did you know that trees can communicate with each other? Scientists have discovered fungal networks between the root systems of trees that act as neural pathways and allow them to warn each other of danger, and even send nutrients to each other when one gets sick. I was sick and you took care of me.

Trees are out here practicing Jesus' teachings in more complex ways than we could ever dream of and they're doing it without spinning themselves in circles, arguing about who really deserves those nutrients, and is it really fair that we're all focusing our energy on the one sick tree when I actually worked really hard for my individual nutrients, and I shouldn't have to share. We could stand to learn a lot from trees if we open ourselves to a true encounter.

The natural world actually contains the wisest teachings we have on the subject of community. Natural ecosystems are literally made up of tons of different organisms that have created space for each other to be fully themselves and thrive together. It's almost like—stay with me here—it's almost like God planned it that way. I'm reminded of Joel Salatin, self-proclaimed lunatic farmer who gained notoriety for his "wacky" way of farming which rests on the concept of mimicking natural systems. He wanted nothing to do with the GMOs and the pesticides and the antibiotics of conventional and factory farms and do things the good old-fashioned way, the way nature intended. His theory of farming holds that when animals and plants do what they were made to do, it results in an efficient and productive livestock farm.

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He rotates his cows on different pastures, making sure not to overgraze the grasses. Their manure fertilizes the ground, and their grazing helps the grass root deeper into the earth, enriching the soil. Then he takes the chickens, who eat bugs out of cow manure and thereby prevent disease, who leave behind nitrogen-rich manure themselves that again, helps the pasture thrive.

Now he's got happy, healthy animals and vast plains of free gourmet grass buffet with great growing soil and no outside pesticides, fertilizers, or antibiotics involved. All these different creatures are given the space to be fully themselves, to lean into their essential cow-ness, their fundamental chicken-ness. Together all their different functions work in harmony.

This harmonious ecological balance calls to mind the Body of Christ as it is described in 1st Corinthians—there are many parts and one body. Not all of the parts function the same way, but all work together to form the whole Body of Christ. Just like Joel Salatin's natural pastoral ecosystem. Just like us. We are the Body of Christ. Each one of us is a part of it.

This ecological harmony body of Christ stuff sounds nice and all, but perhaps it strikes you as a bit romantic, a bit sentimental. Anyone who's ever actually been a part of a real community knows it isn't all sunshine and rainbows all the time. But Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that our faith communities are the places where the teachings of our religion are truly tested.

We practice what we preach right here, with each other, every day. The IMPACT kids are doing it.

Let's take a leaf from their book. They practice community until they're living and breathing it like it's the most natural thing in the world. When we commit ourselves to the practice of community, the practice of welcoming others into this space where they can be fully themselves, we give others the opportunity to show us God.

We practice welcome even when it's gritty, even when it's imperfect, even when the face of God looks a lot like someone we find pretty annoying. We don't do this because it's a means to an end—our welcome is not a church growth strategy. Our welcome springs up from the treasure of truth and of peace that we have to share, from our conviction that Jesus is here somewhere, hiding behind every corner, waiting for us to see him. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

—Prayers of the People— Sarah Champlin

Lord God, the one who calls us to this place, we give thanks for the joys of our lives, and we cry out to you for that grief that surrounds us. We ask that you would guide us in the work of justice, peace, and compassion in our world, that we may be the image of Divine love in those spaces that seemed covered by pain. We pray for those in our congregation seeking peace, stillness, joy, or something unnameable. We pray that they find wholeness in your presence. For those who grieve, may there be comfort, and for those who mourn, may there be peace.

We pray for our youth, the disciples of today and tomorrow. We pray that your Spirit would embolden them to seek all that is good. We pray for our seniors who are getting ready to go on to new journeys and adventures. Wherever their next steps take them, we pray that you would guide them in love and grace to shine their lights wherever they are.

We pray for your peace even in those places far from us. For those in Gaza, Ukraine, and other parts of the world that are torn by war, we pray for liberation and peace. May the tears of the heartbroken be caught by your loving and compassionate hands. We ask that you move upon the leaders of the nations to seek that which is life-giving: peace and reconciliation.

God of every beautiful thing, make us people of wonder. Attune our hearts to the good still stirring in our midst. Grant us habits of sacred pause. Let us marvel not just at the grand or majestic, but see beauty's name etched into every ordinary moment. Let the mundane swell with a mystery that makes us breathe deeper still. And by this, may we be sustained. Now, we pray together in one voice, the prayer that Jesus taught us: Our Father.... Amen.

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