

“Holding Up Stars”

November 12, 2023

*Based on Matthew 25:31-40. Jesus Tells Us Who He Is.*

Imagine, if you are a parent, and even if you are not, that one day your beloved child leaps off the school bus, bounds into the house, starry eyed, with a gleeful grin and declares, “When I grow up, I want to be ... *hungry!*”

*Oh, and thirsty, too!*

*Don't forget sick and in prison.*

And then with the biggest gleefulest grin of all: *When I grow up, I want to be NAKED!!!*

We would yank our kid out of that school right away and turn in the teacher to the state board of education. To which our child might reply, *But you always told me I should be more like Jesus!*

What in the world are we to do when it turns out our kid is right? When all of the things we think we are supposed to be teaching them about making good grades and getting a good job and paying their taxes - on time, no less - what do we do when teaching our children to just generally being good people is seemingly at odds with the aspirational identity of Jesus, who says if we want to save our lives we have to lose them and if we want to follow him we have to take up our own cross and if we want to see the One who saves us, we have to look in the face of the One who walks on the edge and walk right along that edge with them?

It is not easy to walk in the Way and the Spirit of Jesus, and to be honest, I sometimes wonder if it would be a whole lot easier to be a church that cares more about doctrine and dogma than compassion because at least in those churches you know where you stand. You either believe it or you don't and that is that.

For us, here at SPC, our aspirational identity is a lot murkier. We believe in welcoming and belonging and meaning, which is highly subjective. What you think is welcoming may not be welcoming to me, and what makes me feel like I belong could be the exact opposite of what makes you feel like you belong.

We believe in compassion and wholeness and justice, which looks really great on paper, up on the wall in a nice frame, but in practice requires a daily commitment to inner and outer transformation, which is just plain hard work.

We want to be rooted in the Way of Jesus, which is in itself the journey of a lifetime. People have been trying to figure out how to do that for centuries and even millennia. And at the same time we want to receive enrichment through wisdom from all sources, which is great but may also render us spiritually conflicted as a congregation.

Through it all we want our worship to enliven our spirits, we want our mission and advocacy to fix the planet, we want our music to embarrass the angels - which it does! - and we most certainly want our kids to grow up to be something *other* than hungry, naked, in prison.

And yet Jesus is telling us that all of those things that we think bring vitality to our congregation - the overflowing pews, the big budgets, the best preacher ever (wink, wink, nod, nod) - all of those things that may seem like they mark our *success* - they are just not the point at all.

The point is, do we care?

Thank goodness the answer is, at least according to our newest members, an unqualified yes! You and I have managed to convince them that this congregation, with all of our murkiness and all of our internally conflicted spiritual searching and all of our hard work of inner and outer transformation, we have managed to convince them that *this* is the place they want to raise their children and grandchildren to be more like the real Jesus (who is found among the most vulnerable), that *this* is the place they want to contribute their own time and talent, that *this* is the place they want to make sure continues into the future so others can find this kind of welcome, too.

As they join us, they become fire to our wood, as the poet puts it so beautifully. Their inspired choice to claim our aspirational identity as their own compels us all to transform, as they interpret and en flesh in their own way who we say we want to be. Without them our community has not been complete. With them, we hold up the pieces of star that still dwell within us all.