

Sermon Note: Expand the Circle

Third Sunday of Easter

Introduction

As we continue our post-Easter series Reckless Love, we return to a central question from our source book: who exactly is our neighbor? Last week we explored what it means to begin with love. This week we ask who that love is actually for, and whether the answer is as broad as Jesus seems to intend.

In this week's reading, we follow Jesus from the shores of Gennesaret to the home of a tax collector, and the pattern of who he chooses to spend time with raises an uncomfortable question. What does it look like to follow Jesus into relationship with people we would not have chosen? What does it require, and what does it make possible? Bishop Tom Berlin's Reckless Love continues to be our companion guide as we explore what it means to expand the circle.

Illustration Video

(Note: contains one brief instance of crude language.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LhpYfjGZvw>

In this clip from A League of Their Own (1992), a group of women arrive at baseball tryouts as strangers, all of them sizing each other up and all of them there to prove they belong.

Why This Video?

Doris has already decided, before the newcomers even walk up, that some of them probably won't make it. She's not wrong to be skeptical. Everyone there is competing for a limited number of spots, and she has no reason to trust strangers. Then Dottie catches her throw bare-handed, and Doris, who had already decided these women wouldn't last, asks: "How did you do that?" In this unexpected moment, a stranger is suddenly worth a second look.

Video Discussion Questions

1. At the start of the scene, every woman on that field is being sized up and judged. How does that shared experience shape the way they relate to each other?
2. Doris has been working on her bat trick for over a year. What does it tell you that she's still out there, still practicing, in an environment that's already skeptical of her?
3. What is Doris communicating when she tells the newcomers, "Some of you is gonna have to go home"? What does that kind of preemptive sizing-up protect her from?
4. What changes in the moment Dottie catches the throw? When Doris asks, "How did you do that?" what does this tell us about what just happened between them?
5. These women didn't choose each other. They were put in the same place by the same circumstance. What does the scene suggest about how unexpected communities get started?
6. By the end of the clip, Doris is asking Dottie questions instead of writing her off. What nearly prevented that moment?

7. Think of a moment when someone surprised you, when a person you had already formed an opinion about turned out to be very different from what you assumed. What happened? Did it change your opinion?

Luke 5:1–11, 27–32 (NRSVue)

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” ⁵Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to burst. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’s knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” ⁹For he and all who were with him were astounded at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

²⁷After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, “Follow me.” ²⁸And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

²⁹Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them. ³⁰The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” ³¹Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; ³²I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Scripture Study Questions

1. What did Jesus see and experience that drew him to Simon’s boat?
2. What is the significance of Simon addressing Jesus as “Master” when he expressed his resistance, then his compliance?
3. When have you felt “in over your head” in your efforts to follow Jesus? What guidance does Simon’s honest outburst offer you for growing through such times?
4. What will you do to sense Jesus’ comfort and calling in the midst of life’s challenges? What do you need to leave behind to follow Jesus’ invitation to go deeper? How can your faith community help you hear and follow Jesus?
5. Jesus asks Simon, a professional fisherman, to try something that goes against his expert judgment. Think of an area of your own life where you consider yourself competent. How hard would it be to hear Jesus say, “Try it differently”?
6. When Jesus goes to Levi’s house, he ends up at a table with “a large crowd of tax collectors and others.” The Pharisees are outside, scandalized. Who do you think was more uncomfortable, the

Pharisees watching from outside, or the disciples sitting at that table? What does the scene tell you about what it means to follow Jesus into someone else's world?

7. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Look at who he has already called: fishermen, now a tax collector. What pattern do you see in the people Jesus gathers? What does it tell you about the kind of community he is trying to build?

Weekly Action

Last week's message was titled, Begin with Love. As a reminder to begin with love, write the letter B on a post-it note and put it somewhere you'll see it this week. Each week of this series we'll add a letter to help us live out these commandments.

This week, think of one person Jesus seems to keep placing in your path, someone outside your usual circle. Make a deliberate move toward them: a conversation, a greeting, a moment of genuine attention. On a notepad or note on your phone, write down what you notice. Then pray: ask God to expand your circle and give you the courage to keep moving toward the people God places in your life.

Prayer

Creator God, create us anew, every day, as people who receive and share your love. Give us the trust to come to you as we are, and the courage to embrace what you call us to embrace and release what you call us to release. Show us yourself through your compassionate eyes, that we may love ourselves and love our neighbors, especially those the world too often overlooks. This we pray in the name of your love made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.