

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - IMMERSION

Lent

Mark 1:9-11

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists
Listen for the word of God.

Mark 1:9-11¹

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

I have always had trouble leaving home. When I was 10 years old, I liked nothing more than lying on my bed and reading my book. My mom would come in, knock at my bedroom door, and say, "Peter, you gotta go out and play. You gotta go play with the neighborhood boys and play" (of all things) "street hockey." I hated street hockey! I just wanted to stay home. I just wanted to read my book. I just wanted to be left alone. I've always had a hard time leaving home. What about you?

When I was 17, I was *so* ready to leave home. I wore my Colgate University sweatshirt all the time. And when graduation came, I left school without a goodbye, without a parting. I fled to school.

What about you? How do you do leaving home? What I mean is what's life doing to you today to call you out of the place that you called home into some different place? Where in this past year have *you* been called out from that place you used to call home into this place where you are today?

Will you join me in prayer.

God,
We gather here this morning as a homeless people,
as a longing people, and as a hoping people
seeking to remember our name in this place where we are today
and to hear Your word of love to us.
- Amen

At 18 years old I ended up at Colgate University. And I looked around and I said, "I don't know a single person here. What a great thing! I could be whoever I want to be in this place!" But all, of course, I

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - IMMERSION

knew was who I had always been; and how do you be somebody different? What about you? Who are you called to be today?

All I knew at that time was that I was lost, but I didn't want to tell anybody that. And all I know is that I ended up at the little Protestant church that met on the stage in the *huge* Memorial Chapel at Colgate every Sunday morning with 30, 40 other lost souls like me who wouldn't admit so. And we came for one thing. Because it was one place where I could know my name again. And as the chaplain Coleman Brown stood before us and every Sunday, he welcomed us a community of believers and seekers and doubters, I knew I had a home and I knew a place where somebody knew my name in all of my lostness. Does somebody know your name? I mean, really know your name - I mean, *really*, who you are?

You know, we don't know why Jesus left home. Maybe his mother kicked him out. Maybe, maybe he heard some stirring within him that he was supposed to go down there to the Jordan River. All that we know, all that we know is [that] the story doesn't care really about where he used to be, but the story begins as it begins in the gospel of Mark again with Jesus having left home and finding himself in this place - an empty place, a nameless place, a nowhere place.

Now, in all of that biblical imagination, right, and in the truth of what that place is really like, it's out there in the desert, a little stream running through nowheresville. But you've been there. I mean, even if you've never been to *that* Jordan River, you've been there. You know life. And perhaps you know what it's like exactly today to be in the place of left home and you're in this place where nobody knows your name: an empty place, a desert place. Who are you?

In the great biblical imagination something happens: Jesus coming up out of the water, the heavens tearing apart, the Holy Spirit descending, God naming *you*:

You are.
You are Celeste.
You are Peter.
You are!

Oh, I long for such a moment. Have you had such a moment? And maybe at this time in my life I don't expect the heavens to rend and a voice to come. But I still come with a hunger: Will you remind me in this lost place who I am? Can you speak in a language that I can understand?

It was 24 years ago. And I was 32 years old. And I was standing here - or actually I was standing over here. And I was preaching on that Sunday on this exact same text, the baptism of Jesus. And there was another baptism that day, for Catherine Buhl, Gene and Sally Hill's granddaughter. Dave and I had just found ourselves out here in this very strange place called the West Coast, in Seattle. I had wondered who in the world to live out here - so far from civilization in Massachusetts? Who are these people that walk through the line and don't just shake your hand or nod but they hug you?! Who are these people?

And in all of that lostness on that very first Sunday that I preached, I preached a sermon called "Remember Who You Are." As I thought back about what is changed in 24 years, it's this: at that point - and not knowing this community and all - I had not a clue how often we would need to be reminded. And as I look back over the last 24 years, it's been full of places that we've needed to

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - IMMERSION

remind each other in all of the joys and all of the brokenness that is life, who we are. Do you remember your name today on this baptism Sunday? Do you remember? Do you remember who you are? Did somebody know your name?

I met her in class two weeks ago. She told us her story. She said when I was born, the first daughter in my family, my parents gave me a beautiful, beautiful name: Araceli. Araceli. I went to school, however, and nobody had ever heard of a name like *that* before. They got the vowels and the syllables all mixed up. They called me Arakelly or Ariel. They laughed! And she said, "No, my parents named me Araceli."

When she went to high school, she gave up. I mean, people mispronouncing her name all the time and she said, "Just call me Ariel." And when she went to college just call me Erica.

Araceli said, "You know, if you go to a party, everybody at the party will call me a different name. And I can tell how I knew them and where I knew them in my life, because of what they call me." But it was only at home, only at home the people really knew her name, Araceli. "Araceli, welcome home."

I don't know. I don't know how to preach on another Sunday after another school shooting. How do you keep doing this?

I do wonder. I do wonder who looked at Nikolas Cruz in the eye and knew his name. What I do know is that loneliness and isolation and ridicule tear at our souls and do terrible things to us. I *don't* know, I don't *know* why Nikolas on that Ash Wednesday couldn't look out – didn't look out – and see everybody else and know their names: Alyssa, Scott, Martin, Aaron, Jamie, Luke, Cara, Chris, Gina, Joaquin, Alaina, Meadow, Helena, Alex, Carmen, Peter, Nicholas.²

All that I know is that when we do not recognize each other by name, it causes terrible harm. And what I know is this: It was the morning after class and I was catching the BoltBus back from Portland to Seattle. Six o'clock in the morning. It was dark. It was drizzly. My cup of coffee in my hand. And a little line growing of other commuters on the way back to Seattle. And I looked down the line and then I saw her coming. I mean this woman shuffling along with her hand out asking for change. And - I'm not always like this - but on that morning standing there I just wanted her to go away. I just wanted to be left alone. And as she came down the line and people shook their heads or turned away or just said nothing, I, too, just shook my head. She came to the woman standing beside me; and [that woman] looked up and she looked her in the eye and she pulled around her purse and she opened it and she took out some change and she said, "Have a good day." And I stood there beside her and I pulled out my wallet and I gave her some change, "Have a good day."

It's so easy to forget. It's so important we remember who we are and that we look each other in the eye and know.

But I also know now at 56 years old that I didn't know at 32 years old is that life gives you lots of stuff. The longer you live, you get more stuff! At 32, I was here at the beginning of *making* a name, right?

² Names verified 3/1/2018 at http://www.tampabay.com/news/publicsafety/The-victims-of-the-Parkland-school-shooting_165511796

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - IMMERSION

Gosh, our names were all over the paper.³ We had a name! Half the congregation just called me "Dave." But life at that point and at 32 years old - and *bless* you all who are in your 30s - it is about making your name. There is the importance of making your name. There is all of that. And I will tell you this, when you get to be 56 or 76 or I imagine 96, life has done its work in you. And you, too, will have your time of standing in the line and shaking your head – not your best – at the woman who comes by, she just wants you to look at her in the eye, and say "good morning." And it's true, you realize that you're a lot more messy. You've succeeded at love and you've failed to love. You failed far from perfection. You've done some things right, really right. And, gosh, have you messed up at times. You're not all you hoped to be. Yes, you lived into a name but perhaps not all the name you thought you were. And then there's this Jesus who looks at us and says, "You and all of your messiness - your 56-year-old, your 76-year-old messiness - you, just like Celeste, I love you."

Elio: 17 years old. And he just had an amazing summer fling with a student who was spending the summer at their family's house in Italy. This was his first love affair and, yes, perhaps they had been more than friends. Perhaps they really had loved each other. And Elio he loved Oliver. But Oliver did as graduate students do. They go home and back to life and back to the relationships they had and back to all of that. And [left] Elio sitting on the couch crying. What a great thing to be 17-year-old kid that can cry - and that cry in front of your dad, who comes and sits on the couch next to him. And his dad says, "Elio, I want you know this. Let in all of the joy of what you and Oliver shared. Let it all in and let in all of the sorrow, as well. Just let it all in. And don't cut any of it out, because if you do you cut off part of your life. Let it all in. I love you, Elio."

She was a graduate school by this point. And the teacher was going through the roll. And she said to herself, "Not one more time. Not one more time of people having to skip over the syllables and the accents. Not one more time of having to explain this beautiful name my parents have called me. Not one more time to go through this. Please!" She was ready to jump to her defense ready to pronounce her name one more time. And the teacher got to her place on the roll. She looked down. She looked up. She looked her in the eye, she said, "Araceli," and the whole class cheered.

- Amen

UCUCC: PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/2/28/2018

³ In 1994 when Peter Ilgenfritz and David Schull were hired together as pastors for UCUCC it made national headlines.