

## **“...and See All the People!”**

[Text - Matthew 7:1-5; 24-29]

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February 8, 2015

Two foolish men were trying to build a house. One would take a nail out of his pouch, look at it, and either toss it over his shoulder or hammer it into the wood. When the other saw this, he asked, “Why are you throwing away half of the nails?” The first explained, “When I pull out a nail, if the point is facing me, it’s obviously backward and defective, so I toss it. If it’s pointed toward the house, it’s a good nail and I can use it.” The second man shook his head, “You don’t throw-away those nails! They’re obviously made for the other side of the house!”

While that may seem like a silly story, told by a silly pastor, there’s actually a serious lesson we can take from it. Whether it’s building a residential home, or a Church home, wise builders don’t discard the good and valuable materials available to them. When Jesus Christ talks about building his Church, he definitely understands this. Of course, he ‘s not referring to a physical structure. He’s talking something far more solid, precious, and lasting than all of the great temples, shrines and cathedrals ever built. The Church that Jesus envisions is a living, loving community of faith, consisting of all kinds of people! And those who seek to be a part of this community - who strive to follow Jesus’ example - will learn to see the value in all people, and to extend Christ’s gracious welcome to *all!*”

The inclination to judge, condemn, and toss-aside those people who appear backward or different from us, seems to be a natural human tendency. However, in the Church that Jesus is building, our natural tendencies are completely turned around. In the Divine Blueprint of Life, it is the little ones who are important; the lowly who are exalted; the outcast welcomed; the “untouchables”

embraced; and the poor and meek - not the proud and mighty - who inherit the earth. In the Church that Jesus envisions, people are called to confess their *own* sins, rather than pointing-out the sins of others. And people's weaknesses and failings are met with holy compassion, rather than hostile condemnation.

A while back, one of our newer members asked me why I didn't preach any "hell-fire and brimstone" sermons. He didn't bring this up as a criticism, or a suggestion that I do so; he simply said that in his previous experience, that's what a lot of preachers emphasized. I told him the reason I didn't do it, is because it's not what Jesus did. In fact, I noted, that the only time Jesus really gets riled-up, is when he encounters those hell-fire religious leaders who are judging, condemning, or excluding others.

On Palm Sunday, when Jesus storms into the Jerusalem Temple, knocking-over the money-changers' tables and driving the animal-selling merchants out of that house of worship, his anger arises because they are turning-away of those people who lack the money to buy a sacrificial animal at their inflated prices. They have turned that House of Prayer "into a den of thieves!" Of course today, we Christians would never turn-away someone from a house of worship because of their lack. Unless perhaps they lack our correct theological understanding; or the proper Baptismal credentials; or our deep appreciation for the true, Biblical "family values." [Though considering that polygamy and deeply dysfunctional families are prevalent among the Biblical Patriarchs, that last one's a little tricky!]

Jesus himself has a pretty strange "family" for his time and culture. He's an unmarried 30 year-old man, who essentially lives with 12 other men, and has a "posse" of seedy tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other publically classified "sinners!" And when the "fire-and-brimstone" leaders of his day try to get Jesus to sanction their condemnation of a woman who is caught in the act of

adultery, he refuses to do so. They argue, “But God’s Law *insists* that she be put to death by stoning!” [Yes, that commandment is in our Bible, too!] Jesus replies, “O.K., then let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” And one-by-one, they put-down their rocks and walk away.

It’s bad enough when people who are struggling through Life fall upon rocky times; they certainly don’t need any self-righteous individuals throwing more rocks at them. What they need, is a warm, supportive and loving community that welcomes them just as they are. What our hurting and fear-filled world needs is not more bad news, but the *Good News* of God’s extravagant love and gracious welcome.

Trying to build a good, solid, and holy faith community, using only good, solid, and holy people, is to completely miss the point. It’s like building a hospital exclusively for perfectly healthy people! It’s like foolishly tossing-aside those nails, because they’re facing the wrong direction! The Church of Jesus Christ is a community where people’s backwardness, peculiarities, and differences are welcomed, accepted, and even celebrated! It’s a place where - when we *are* headed in the wrong direction - there are caring and compassionate people who encourage us, and help us find our way home. It’s a place where kindness, openness and love isn’t just talked about, but is graciously extended to those who need it the most.

The reason we call this room a “sanctuary” is because within these walls, all God’s children can feel welcome, safe and secure. Among this Family of Faith, there is always room at the Table for others. And our wonderful mission, is to faithfully build-up the Body of Christ, by continually inviting others to join us on the journey. This morning, as we welcome our newest members into the Brecksville United Church of Christ, we celebrate our oneness

with *all* of God's children. We joyfully acknowledge that Jesus Christ is our example and Redeemer, our inspiration and our friend. And we recognize that we are all here because of Christ' gracious invitation. Even our youngest children understand how this works: "This is the church, this is the steeple, open the doors and see ***all*** the people!" I thank God that Jesus builds his Church using all kinds of people, and that all people - even sinners - are welcome. That's why I'm here today!