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08/27/2023

Third Place

Today we hear Jesus ask that infamous question, “Who do people say that I am.” Can’t you just imagine all of the disciples looking at one another spouting off answers. Well...uh...“some say John the Baptist.” “But, others Elijah.” “And! Still others Jeremiah!” “Or one of the prophets!” Causing Jesus to get just a little bit annoyed, we might assume, with his followers, maybe even with himself. Like... yeah... ok, that’s what other people say. But, what about YOU people?! You people who I have called out of boats. You people who have left your lives, families, and incomes. You people who have seen me baptized in a river, and walk across a lake. You people who have assisted me in feeding the masses, eating with sinners, and healing people from disease and torment. You people! “Who do YOU say that I am?” Now, we can just see it, even hear it. Crickets chirping. Awkward silence brewing. As the disciples all stuff their hands in their pockets, shuffle their feet on the ground. Trading side glances and muffled coughs, as they hesitate to even mumble an answer under their breath. Until, that is, they all hear good old Simon Peter, without hesitation, or concern, interject and blurt out, “You!” “You Jesus, are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

I am wondering, How many of you have heard of a Third Place? I only heard of the term in the last few weeks. After joining a new gym where the owner referred to the facility as such. A term she referenced from the late sociologist Ray Oldenburg. Who argued that our First Place is home, Second Place work, and Third Place, well our third place is our sanctuary. It is a public space where we build relationships, have fun, and exchange ideas. It is an anchor of the community, where we see familiar faces and meet new acquaintances. Where we feel safe, and are welcomed in with arms wide open and a warm embrace. It is where, like the melody from Cheers goes, “everyone knows your name.” The Third Place, even more so, today, as we find our nation in the midst of a loneliness and isolation epidemic, might even be our salvation.

No sooner does Simon Peter exclaim Jesus as the Messiah, does Jesus laud and honor him saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!... And I tell you, you are [now] Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Blessing Peter with not only his name, no longer Simon Peter but now Peter, or in Greek Petros, as well as his infamous title the Rock, or Petras! It is both interesting, and helpful to note these translations. Because, I believe, it allows us to see how Jesus uses the same word twice, Petros (translated Peter) being the masculine, and Petras (translated rock) being the feminine. More so, Petros, the name Jesus gives Peter, we will note, can literally be translated from the Greek as a stone or pebble. While Petra, the rock, can be translated as a boulder, large rock, or (my personal favorite) mother lode. Making Peter now a portion and piece of the rock (or mother load), which Jesus names as the church.

As a new member of the gym I mentioned earlier, I was of course instructed on the “rules” of the facility. Which was how I came to learn about the “Third Place.” Because, for this facility, and those who use it, it is a Third Place. A place that the whole community works to ensure is not only clean, professional, and fun but also, and maybe more importantly, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive. Which is why, along with the guidelines and rules of wiping down and putting away your equipment they also work to encourage members to embody the spirit of this Third

Place, and treat each other as they want to be treated. Encouraging members to know one another's name, to greet each other at the beginning of class, to encourage one another during the workouts, to congratulate another when we succeed, to help each other through challenges, and to enjoy the hour of time we have committed to sharing with one another. Which might actually be why I have continued to go and stayed committed to that gym and its early morning classes. When usually I would roll over in bed every morning and press snooze, or push back my workout to the end of the day. But, instead I get up and get out of my first place, sometimes before the sun rises, because I look forward to joining others at my new third place.

It is fascinating to me that Jesus chooses Peter as the “Rock”, or at least as a chip off the old block. Because, while we may laud and exonerate Peter today, if we really look at who Peter was from what we have in our Gospel passages, or Acts, or even Paul’s letters, we will see that Peter was more than a cornerstone, he was often a stumbling block. Let’s not forget this is the same disciples who will deny Jesus three times, as his Lord and Savior faces and undergoes execution. At the same time, it might be even more reassuring to me, or maybe more so encouraging, that it is Peter who is called Petro. Because, it means there is hope for you and for me. It means we are all invited to be a part of that rock, and maybe more so it is a reminder that it takes all of us to make up the strength, the stability, and the power of the rock that Jesus named as his church.

For Ray Oldenburg Third Places are "necessary to the infrastructures of human relationships." They are marked and celebrated for their dedication to hospitality, being open and welcoming to people of all types and backgrounds. St. Paul’s in my mind, is just this, it is a Third Place (even if I technically call it my second place). Which is why, I would assume, when I ask any of you what makes St. Paul’s special, almost always, without hesitation or even a second thought, like Peter, you all say it’s the people. In this day and age the church is fraught with all sorts of baggage, even more so, is the name of Jesus. We as the people who follow Jesus, and claim him to be our Messiah, we have work to do. We as members of St. Paul’s, and active participants of this Third Place, have work to do. We, like Paul, as a chip off the old block, a part of the larger whole, have work to do. My hope, and prayer though, is that this work, which is our the mission of this place, “to know Christ and to make Christ known,” will be a part of salvation in the end, a part of what gives us life, what calls us to get out of bed in the morning, what encourages us to know one another's name, to welcome newcomers, to invite strangers, and enjoy being with one another as friends. From our Labyrinth, blessing, box and recent Hot Dog Wednesdays to our Tuesday courthouse prayer circle, Wednesday Bible study, and Sunday morning worship and coffee hour this place has a solid foundation, but it takes all of us to make it a rock, and a mother load. I hope you will remember you are a part of what makes this a Third Place, and more so a crucial component of how people come to know what it means to call Jesus our Messiah. I pray we can continue to work together, to take part in proclaiming the Gospel, and most importantly enjoy the salvation we are creating, sharing, and becoming a part here, now, and together! Because this is our Rock and we are all what makes it strong, what makes it stable and what makes it a beautiful part of God’s creation. NOW, let’s get to work!