

What if...we came to church as we are?

What if...we came to church as we are? We are people who come from different places in our lives. We are struggling people with various situations and scenarios and we come to this place for the Good News as well as to reach out to this community for support, but sometimes people feel that they are not allowed to come into this place if they are not perfect, happy, and content.

The section of the Gospel that I have chosen for this morning is entitled "The Last Judgment." It is a section of Matthew that Jesus is explaining his division of the "good people" from the "bad people" and how we will all be judged by our lives. It is somewhat an apocalyptic text, but it is also a good guiding scripture for us as we talk about coming to church as we are.

In a book from Pastor Mark Clark entitled, "The problem of God: answering a skeptic's challenges to Christianity;" a quote is given from a 2017 Barna Research Group study. They asked non-Christian people why they rejected Christianity. Many Christian leaders were surprised to learn that none of the top six answers were evidential reasons. They

rejected Christianity for moralistic reasons. The top three problems people had with Christianity were that it was viewed as (1) anti homosexual (91 percent of responders), (2) judgmental (87 percent), and (3) hypocritical (85 percent).

Now, the UCC as a whole and I pray that in this congregation we also would **NOT** be viewed this way to a visitor, but these are some of the reasons why people are “not going to church anymore.” People feel judged by what they wear; their tattoos or piercings; or their general demeanor. People are afraid to step foot inside of a church because if they have a past, they don't feel that they would be accepted by these “high and mighty, religious people.”

I am making a generalization here, but this is where this concern and this idea for this final sermon in our What if...Sermon series came from. What if...we came to church as we are? How often do you double check your clothes to make sure that they are “church appropriate?” Now, some people come in jeans and t-shirts and they are welcome to because we are supposed to come as we are, but there are

some people in churches this morning that don't feel that some people are dressed nice enough to come into this Holy Space.

What if we came to church as we are in whatever we are wearing...to be disciples and to not focus on if God is going to frown on if we wear sneakers today. The days of three-piece suits and long flowing dresses and frilly hats has gone away. That's not to say that we don't dress up every now and then anyway or that we won't see nicely dressed people in churches, but we cannot be in fear for not wearing the right thing.

Another thing that keeps people from having a spiritually uplifting service is the challenge of singing. I absolutely love when Brian stops playing the organ for one verse of a hymn that we all know well. He does it almost every time that we have a Mid-Week Lenten Service. I believe that he does this for two reasons and he can correct me later if I am wrong...but one reason is because when we bring voices together from many different congregations, there is a kinship to singing acappela and singing praises to God with our voices raised high. Another reason

is that we usually pick hymns that are well-known enough that people know the tunes and harmony.

I know that I have said this before and I apologize in advance for repeating myself, but one of the true blessings that I receive as a pastor is that I get to stand up in front of you and see the emotion on your faces and listen to the sounds and the harmonies of those songs that we all know so well. When Brian stops playing, even for just one verse, our blended voices are so powerful to be lifting up our own prayer and praise to God and it can be truly moving for me as I all listen to you sing towards me and up towards God.

Now, there are people that will not come to church because they don't like the music. That is why many different churches have various forms of worship and different styles of music, but another reason is that people feel that they cannot sing. I have heard phrases like, "Oh, you don't want me on the choir..." God calls us to make a joyful noise unto the Lord and my answer to someone who may not feel that they are gifted in the musical area is that the key word to that joyful noise is just that...noise...

We come to church as we are...talented singers; life-long musicians; piano players; organ players; trumpeters; guitarists; and the people who sound like a dying cat singing on the alley fence at midnight. How's that for a visual? But we come to this place...as we are...singers and non-singers alike. Those who are dressed to the 9's and those who are in t-shirts, shorts, and sneakers. God welcomes us all.

The Gospel lesson gives us examples of how we are to live...we are to feed the hungry and give a drink to the thirsty. We are to welcome the stranger into our homes. The message of love that Jesus is talking about here is that it doesn't matter who you are, but that you come to him and that we make room at the table for everyone.

On October 8, 2017 there was a meal that took place at the border of Mexico and the United States. It was done by an artist and photographer who put a long table together that went right through the gate and fence at the border crossing. This showed the importance of welcoming the stranger and making sure that there is room at the literal table for everyone as they had a picnic in two countries with people of all types who came together to show the world that there can be peace

and love in such a controversial place right now and that all can be welcomed.

We come to the church as we are. We do not check people at the door to see if they brought their offering. We do not ask you for your tax return so that we make sure that you are giving ten percent. We do not take your kids away as soon as you enter and take them to the nursery...just in case they might make noise...I have heard of this actually happening. We do not ask for your citizenship status; your marital status; or even if you believe. When you come through the doors of the church. You are welcome here.

Now, I am generalizing and stereotyping a lot in this sermon. And I don't want to make it sound like we are the best church out there and that we are perfect in how we treat our visitors, neighbors, and fellow church members. What we are is people of faith who do our best...and we know that when we come to this place; when we come to the church as we are; we should know that we are welcomed so that not only can we feel comfortable in this place and loved by God, but that we can be

loved by the people who are also in this place and that we can love them in return.

This sermon series has been exciting for me to preach and look at our scriptures a little bit differently with an overarching theme. I pray that as we all go our separate ways this week that we will take the time to be in the moment with people. I pray that we will make space for the stranger. I pray that we will see God in everyone and anyone.

What if we came to the church as we are? People in this church and churches all around the world come to the church for many reasons and I want to conclude my sermon series with this thought. You may come to the church broken, not to be fixed, but to be filled. You may come to the church hurting, but you leave the church healed. You may come to the church angry, but you leave the church calm. You may come to the church lonely, but you leave with friendship and companionship from God and from each other. You may come to the church tired, but you leave renewed. You may come to the church feeling dead, but you leave alive! You come as you are...broken, hurting, angry, wearing the right clothes or the wrong clothes; singing like a superstar or not;

challenged by the world and renewed in this place. My prayer is that throughout your days, you may know God and develop a personal relationship with him and that all week, all year, and all of your lifetime you know that you are a beloved child of God. Amen.