

## **Listening To The Margins**

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Luke 18:35-43

### **CHILDREN'S TIME**

I have a basket of rocks here. Some of them are pretty smooth. Here, pick up one of the bigger ones and feel how smooth it is. Do you know that those stones used to be a lot bigger, really rougher and with sharp edges? They were in a stream or ocean and over maybe hundreds of years of time the water washed over them enough to wear off the edges and make them smooth. Isn't that pretty cool.

In the bottom of the basket are some stones that are super smooth. Pick one up and feel how smooth it is. These stones started out much bigger and rougher like the others. Then, someone put them in a rock tumbler with super fine sand and a bit of water and made them super smooth. The more smooth the stones are the more detail you can see in the pattern. Aren't they beautiful?

Over time, rocks can become more smooth and more beautiful as they

are refined by water, sand and even wind.

In the same way, God works with us to help us become more beautiful over time. Through our experiences of learning and growing, and making mistakes, forgiveness, and even pain, God helps us to become more and more beautiful people.

We can thank God for wearing off our rough edges and helping us to become more beautiful people.

### **SERMON**

Listening to the margins...

I took a trip to Gambia, West Africa more than 15 years ago. When we consider the global situation, people living in rural West Africa are often considered the "least of these," or part of the "margins."

While there in the Chamen Village, I was warmly welcomed by the village. After being there a week, they provided me a ceremony during which they welcomed me as a member of their village and gave me a new name, Usman Bittae.

They warmly welcomed me with hugs and smiles, and in the very same breath they said, "Now, as a member of our village you must

talk to your rich relatives in America and give to us ...” and they went through a long list of things they wanted for their village. I quickly realized there was some sort of disfunction going on.

I discovered that years earlier, well-meaning people from different parts of the world determined by themselves what the “poor” people of the Chamen Village needed without ever asking them. So, they sent bags of rice and other food that was delivered to these “marginalized” people with the intention to help provide a better life.

Their response was “Wow! Look how Allah has provided. (Allah is the Muslim name for God.) We no longer need to farm our land.”

Since Allah had provided they no longer felt they needed to teach their children the age-old practices of farming that kept their village prosperous with food from the land for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years.

Now, the people of Chamen Village look to people outside their community to give them what they need and want.

You see, well-meaning people with an interest in helping, created a dysfunction and dependence they

never had before, and they did more harm than good, because they didn’t first listen to the people on the margins.

### **READ LUKE 18:35-43**

Notice how everyone else wanted the person on the margins to be silenced, hushed and brushed aside for the more important work of Jesus to be done. But Jesus stopped them all with an interest in this person. He called him over and intently listened to his need and then responded to ease his pain.

I have mentioned a number of times that God speaks to us from the margins of society, from outside our community— often from the non-religious world, the people we sometimes describe as unenlightened. But it is our responsibility to listen.

Well, who is on the margins in our community, in our slice of the world? What are they saying? Discuss these two questions around your tables and write your comments on the sheets of paper on your table, then you can report to the whole group.

Are our ears tuned to the voice of those in the margins, or are we simply too consumed by our own inner work to notice?

Honestly, this church has been inner focused for a while, and it is understandable. You were without a pastor for two years after Pastor Wes retired, and since I have been here we have been searching for a second pastor and a new Music Director. We have also revised our governance structure and created new teams.

All of these things require that we pay attention inwardly to what is going on within this congregation.

This year, we have been shifting some of that inward focus outward through our Community Engagement Team, and now is the season to focus more into the community and into the margins of society to hear their voices.

Our Community Engagement Team has been pioneering some work with a population that I want to pick up on today. I understand that some of what we will be talking about today might be uncomfortable for some of you, but perhaps it is helpful that we talk about it.

One of the more vulnerable and marginalized groups of people in the world today are those identifying as LGBTQ — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning. There is an expanded list with the initials

LGBTQQIAA+. This additionally includes those identifying as: transsexual, two-spirit, intersex, asexual and ally. The “+” includes pansexual, agender, gender queer, bi-gender, gender variant, and pangender.

The term LGBTQ is currently the most common term used to describe this community. Some others include “Queer Community” or “Rainbow Community.” However, these labels and terms are very fluid, continually changing and evolving.

When we are listening, one thing that we often hear from the LGBTQ margin is that it is important to address people in the way that they choose to describe themselves. This is both respectful and has people experience being honored as human beings.

Forcing different language on people than they choose for themselves reinforces marginalization, isolation, and leaves the door open for more hate and violence, which people in marginalized populations often already have to deal with regularly.

Using the proper pronoun or term really does make a significant difference.

Now, I am not an expert in this terminology. I need to continually listen and learn from those on the margins how to both talk and relate in a way that is respectful and honoring.

It is always helpful to have our ears and hearts tuned to listen to the margins with curiosity. When we do, we learn about proper terminology, what is needed in the margins, and what might be truly helpful.

Many people who identify with the “Queer Community” have grown strong bonds of support from others in their own community. These bonds are incredibly important and often a lifeline in a world that has continually targeted them with hate and violence that stems from fear and ignorance.

However there are even more who are not linked into a community of support and are disconnected, feel isolated, alone, fragile, afraid, and judged. These people have a significantly higher risk for suicide than the general population.

Can you imagine how Jesus might have interacted with people in the Queer Community? I am convinced it would have been with respect and love, just like he did with blind man shouting for mercy, or the woman at the well, or the

woman caught in the act of adultery, and many others who were marginalized in his day.

One of the more difficult journeys for a marginalized person in this country today is for those who have come out as transgender.

It seems that understanding transgender is a difficult thing for people to wrap their heads, much less their hearts, around — especially if they have never personally known someone who identifies as transgender.

Sometimes we have to work hard to suspend judgement in order to relate to people simply as human beings who were made in the image of God.

I’ll never forget the day in 1999 when I walked into worship one Sunday morning at Chilson Hills Church in Howell, MI where I grew up, and met a young man who had never been there before. Pastor David Swink introduced him to me as his nephew, Calvin, from North Carolina.

I learned that Calvin was invited by David and Jamie Swink to live with them because he had come out as transgender and there was simply no support for him in the south.

Transgender people know themselves as people with a different gender identity than the one they were assigned at birth. Calvin was assigned as male when born, but identified herself as a female.

The family determined that if Calvin were to stay in North Carolina, the likely course for his life would have been suicide. He was fragile and needed support.

Chilson Hills, however was in a fairly conservative community in Livingston County, but the congregation was open enough to support people unconditionally with love even when they may not fully understand or might disagree politically. In that way, it was a healthy place for Calvin.

And support Calvin they did, through the process as Calvin soon transitioned to Cali, and began to dress and express herself as a woman.

I experienced that at first it was very awkward for her to fully express herself as a woman. She was learning the social role, how to wear makeup and so much more, but she soon bridged the learning curve and integrated a new understanding of herself into life and grew a social identity as a woman around people who

supported her and loved her unconditionally.

Cali eventually moved to Ann Arbor, where there was a strong community support for her and where she found employment opportunities. She now has her own energy work practice in Baltimore, Maryland.

She truly has a whole new life. What was required was the unconditional support and love of people around her who would not judge her.

In order for her to be well and whole, it required radical hospitality.

In the coming months, we will be exploring the margins in our community. We will be asking questions and approaching people with curiosity to learn and to understand. This will certainly have us feeling uncomfortable at times.

However, the benefit is that we will grow a heart for people we would never have known otherwise. We will grow compassion like Jesus, who had his whole entourage stop so that he could listen to a blind man in the margins who desperately wanted to see.