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Turquoise Tables

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Call stories can be some of the most interesting stories in the Old and New Testaments because there can be something attractive about the idea that God or Jesus intentionally reaches out to us ordinary human beings in our busy ordinary human lives and calls us to make some changes. We saw this when Jesus called to his disciples in Mark's Gospel this morning, and immediately those who were called made the change from following the busyness of their lives to following Jesus. They were a lot like the people in Nineveh in our Old Testament reading from Jonah who were quick to change, which, by the way, is what the word 'repent' means: to change one's heart and mind. In the New Testament and the Gospels, it is often used to mean to turn away from social and political agendas and to turn toward God.

We don't know if it meant that specific change for the disciples, but they were certainly willing to change their identity from fishermen to fishers of people. Now, the phrase "fishers of people" is often used to describe a form of evangelism, where unbelievers are "hooked" into coming to Church or following Jesus. But that interpretation must come from folks who don't do much fishing themselves, because those of us who do can tell you there is often very little catching that goes on when you put your baited hook or fly in the water. Besides, it seems from the Gospel that is not what Jesus himself meant. Biblically the term fishing was often used as a metaphor for teaching, or for participating in God's Kingdom, which Jesus declared was near in our Gospel today.

To fish for people seems to mean to accept the invitation to participate in the Kingdom of Heaven, by being followers of Jesus, to listen to him. For those of us following Jesus today, it could also mean to listen for what God is calling us to, and to be willing to say yes, even when we don't know, as Jesus' disciples could not have known when they were called, where following God's call will take us. When we hear call stories, I believe it is easy to fall into the trap of believing it means following examples like Jonah or other Bible heroes such the disciples: leaving our hometowns and traveling to other places far, far away. But that would be a mistake. Because sometimes God's call is to go into places that can feel just as foreign or disconnected, but might be a whole lot closer. Like our front yards.

That is the call a woman in Texas named Kristin Schell heard. Kristin is not a pastor of a church. She isn't the founder of a great social justice movement. She is a wife and mother of four children who lives in an upper middle-class suburb in Austin. Yet, she heard God's call. It started with remembering a semester she spent in France when she was in college and how her host family had these long, engaging dinners around their table. It wasn't just the food, it was the stories and conversations that got loud with laughter and sometimes went late into the night where she remembered feeling included, even though she was a foreigner and couldn't always understand the language.

When she compared that experience to her own home life she was not happy with the difference she saw. She noticed her husband, children and herself were more connected to their computers or electronic devices than to each other. Too often she was texting her husband or children while they were in the house instead of just talking to them, because it was easier to do. She also noticed that while she and her husband hosted an elaborate Memorial Day Block party for their neighborhood complete with entertainment like local bands and bouncy houses, which was the only time the neighborhood interacted with one another.

She decided to make a change; to create a place of hospitality and community by opening her home to her neighbors and make her family to come together for dinner and unplug from their devices. But she discovered this was easier said than done. For starters, people's schedules were too packed with other things, people were just too busy, Kristin included. And she too often fell into the trap of thinking she had to host elaborate events to make people want to come, so it was just too much work. Soon, she felt like she had failed to answer God's call.

At a local event meant to inspire community involvement, Kristin prayed to God to show her what God wanted hospitality to look like. And she believes God answered her prayer with one of the presentations that day about an 84-year-old woman named Ludmilla, who lives in an apartment complex in Prague and has a plaque outside her door that reads: "Embassy of the Kingdom of Heaven". This plaque served as an invitation for her neighbors to come in and talk with her.

Kirstin was awed by Ludmilla's ministry of presence, but it wasn't until the cheap, plain picnic table from Lowes intended for her back yard was accidentally delivered to her front yard that she understood how to answer this call she was feeling from God. She kept that picnic table in her front yard, near the sidewalk, and painted it turquoise. Then, every day, she went outside and sat down at that table. To her delight, the turquoise table attracted her neighbors; they came over, talked a while, and after time the neighborhood grew closer.

It wasn't long before other people in other neighborhoods in Austin put out their own turquoise tables and had their own way of creating a space of rest or community building. Later, Kristin was asked to speak at community building events, and the Turquoise Table and Front Yard Movement was born. As I understand it, there are people who have put turquoise tables in front of their homes, schools, hospitals, business, farmers markets, and other places across the country where there is calling or a desire to turn from worshiping the idol of busyness and pay attention to people in those communities instead, which in turn, creates a space of peace, where Jesus himself is Present. You can read more about her story in Kristin's book simply titled: *The Turquoise Table*.

Kirstin's table and her ministry of presence in her neighborhood reminds me of how we embody our Ministry of Presence here at Church of the Good Shepherd, especially how we open our chapel doors during the week, inviting our neighbors to come inside and rest or pray a while. With such a busy campus life all around us, the offer to enter into a different kind of space, where there are no demands, no ticking clocks, where you can light a candle, or share a thought or prayer, is indeed an offer our neighbors have taken us up on. They often leave messages telling us how much they appreciate that space and our presence in their midst. You can read those messages yourself in the little book on the lectern in the chapel.

Kirstin's story also makes me wonder how God might be calling us to deepen our Ministry of Presence. During this Season of Epiphany when we hear about how Jesus began his ministry, it can be a good time to reflect on our own ministries. I believe we have some wonderful ones here at Church of the Good Shepherd, some like Wednesday Free Lunch, the open chapel, Ashes to God, and giving away coffee and donuts on the first days of class for OU specifically seek to serve as a ministry of presence; to show we are here, and we are different from our neighbors because we are a church, a community of people striving to follow Jesus and God's call to embody the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus brought near to our

community. And this difference is what we offer to our neighbors: the opportunity to turn, at least for a little while, from the busyness that is part of campus life, or everyday life, and lets us walk with them a bit by listening, offering a place for community, or just being open and available.

As we begin new ministries like our growing friendship with our brothers and sisters at St. Luke's in Merida, Mexico, and opening a café/coffee shop in our parish hall, we can reflect on ways these emerging ministries can embody the Ministry of Presence, how we can show up, walk along side those who asked for friendship, or those who will staff our coffee shop or buy a cup of coffee and offer them something different from the culture of busyness.

It might not require painting our tables turquoise, but by praying together, listening to God together, and working together we can find ways bring the Kingdom of Heaven near our neighbors, who might in turn hear a call themselves, which is how the Kingdom of Heaven comes near to all people in all places.