

The one in the corner

Illuminate your path for us and help us hear your wisdom. Oh God, our great creator, Amen.

In my sending parish, there was a woman who always sat in the back pew. She was quiet, always left just before the final hymn, and never stayed for our coffee hour. My sending parish, the community that sponsored me for seminary and raised me up for my call to ordained ministry, had a very active sharing of the peace. It was a very intentional community where everyone was included, and it took a lot to get everyone re-centered to move on with the service. I remember this woman being very polite and reserved during this time but still participating. I normally served as a Eucharistic Minister during the service, so I could only observe the people and rarely got a chance to speak with folks after the service or if they came to the educational offerings I participated in or ran.

One Sunday, I wasn't serving, so I got to experience church and was able to sit in my favorite spot in church, the back pew. I asked the mysterious woman I had been observing if it was okay if I sat next to her, and she very quietly said yes, of course, and told me her name was Ethel. I shared my name as well. As often happens, we began chatting, and she told me all about her grandkids and that she had just started coming back to church after losing her sister, who was the one who introduced her to the church in the first place. She said it just felt lonely without her, but she was hoping by coming, she would be able to connect with people and maybe feel closer to her sister by better understanding what it was that her sister loved so much about this place.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus paying attention to a sick man that those in the synagogue weren't paying much attention to until his arrival. That man was possessed by unclean spirits after all. The important thing here is Jesus speaking the name of the unclean spirits. By doing so he claims authority over them. In Jesus time the person who speaks one's name has the authority in that conversation. It's kind of the old-world version of name it and claim it. This Gospel is asking us to not look away and to speak the names of those unclean spirits we have in our society today. Things like Racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, xenophobia, and all of those things that keep us from truly seeing each other and God. Not only must we name these things, but we are also being asked to find the roots of these issues and actively work against them. This passage challenges us to find ourselves in it. What are the unclean spirits in our own communities and lives that we need to name? What could it mean for us to name these things and to find ways to see each other's suffering and name the root of it? To truly listen to each other so that we can better name the things that might be harming our community.

The Pop-up work that the Discovery Team has has been engaging the community in in an example of this. We have been working on listening deeply, sharing boldly, and praying with those who stop by our tent or table depending on where we are. As we begin to understand how we use our own stories to understand the stories of others, we begin to understand who we are as a community in a different way. We start to see how to connect to our neighbor, and we find that which must be named and then, from there, can begin to heal.

We begin to see the needs of our community a little differently. It becomes more personal, less about those people over there and more about these people in here. Our people. The ones we know and love.

When I began to see Ethel and hear her needs as a part of our community, she opened my eyes to new needs and helped me to see my own judgments and areas of growth, for which I remain grateful to this day.

As I spoke to her and heard more of her story, learning about her sister and the community that they had built at the church, I could see why Ethel wanted to find her way back. I understood why she would quietly sit in the back and, I'm sure, silently talk to God and her sister as she pondered what might be next for her.

My time listening to Ethel's story and the stories of so many who stop by our tent or table remind me of the importance of stopping to really listen and see those who cross our paths.

To offer a kind smile and listening ear to affirm their dignity and their full humanity. This kindness remains something I hear as a call from our text today.

Looking for those who remain the quiet ones in the corner or on the margins, unnoticed, is what this text is calling us to in our everyday lives.

As many of you know and some of you have experienced, the Prayer Pop-up that the Discovery Team continues to offer next to the Abundance shop and sometimes at community events is one example of how we as a community can respond to this call, and I strongly encourage all of you to engage with this ministry to better connect with the community outside the walls of the church. In addition to the feeding and laundry ministry that you may be a part of.

While this text is a call to action, it also serves as a reminder for us to call attention to injustices in the world, identify them, and call out their names so that the evils done on our behalf can no longer stand unnamed.

Too often, we stay silent when faced with that difficult decision to speak up and act. Naming those things which challenge our society only serves to bring them to light.

I pray this week we may be more aware of those on the margins and in the corner. God helps us each to use the light within us to illuminate and name those things that would keep us from God and each other. Doing what we can to help heal the world around us. **Amen**