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Creative Belonging
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Mark 2:1-12

I wonder if you have ever encountered the children's book by Peter H. Reynolds called "The Dot." It's a wonderful book - recommended to me this week by two of my colleagues, Sonja and Marie, so you know it's got to be good. In "The Dot," there's a little girl named Vashti who is convinced that she is not much of an artist. She just isn't cut out to make art in art class, and so one day she submits a blank piece of paper to her teacher at the end of class, not having put anything on the paper because she just couldn't bring herself to do it. Her teacher gets creative - "just put a little dot on the paper tomorrow and see what happens," she encourages Vashti. So Vashti does. And the teacher hangs up Vashti's art - a piece of paper with a dot on it - in a fancy frame for all the class to see. Vashti is

encouraged enough by this gesture to keep experimenting with dots, and before she knows it, she's a dot art expert. She's trying different colors and textures of dots, and she gets a whole dot art exhibit in the school art show. And the best part is that when she encounters a little boy at the art show who is convinced that he is not an artist, Vashti gets to start that whole cycle of encouragement over again. "Just try drawing one little squiggly line and see what happens." The rest is history. Vashti's very creative art teacher has set in motion a whole cycle of belonging through creativity. It is a beautiful story.

In the Bible story we heard a few minutes ago, we see that same movement from creativity to belonging happening in real time. We find ourselves today in only the second chapter of Mark's gospel – the gospel account that always seems to clip along at a quicker pace than the other gospels, that's heavy on the verbs and light on the adjectives, that brings us along into Jesus's world with immediacy and urgency. We're only in chapter two, but if

we read the verses that precede today's passage, we're reminded that quite a lot has happened already – John the Baptist has prepared the way for Jesus to come onto the scene; Jesus has been born, has grown up, has been baptized, and has been to Galilee to proclaim that God's kingdom has come near. He has called the first disciples, driven out demons from a man in Capernaum, healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law from severe illness. By the end of Mark chapter 1, Jesus has gathered enough of a following that he's healing whole crowds of people – healing bodies and healing communities and restoring people to wholeness both socially and physically. The last story in Mark chapter one is about Jesus healing a person with leprosy, bringing such profound healing into that person's life that they start to tell everyone about Jesus, this amazing person who has wrought such deep healing – in every sense of the word. Mark chapter one ends by telling the reader that at this point, Jesus is so well known that he can't move about freely from place to place without gathering huge crowds. This itinerant preacher is

more than just that – he is a healer, and he has a following. People have heard that the kingdom of God has come near, and they simply must come to hear Jesus speak, to see what he might do in the lives of individuals and the community.

And so, we arrive at today's story. Jesus is in Capernaum, presumably at the home of Simon Peter, where he has already performed amazing healing miracles of all kinds. Word travels fast when Jesus is in town, and there are, of course, crowds. Crowds can be great, but they can also make things complicated – especially if you're needing a little extra space to get where you need to go. Such is the case with this unnamed group of five who show up at Simon Peter's home hoping to meet Jesus. We don't know why they need to meet him – it could be that they have questions for him, as so many people do, or it could be that they'd like to hear one of the cryptic stories he has become famous for, or it could be that they're interested in what kind of healing he might be able to do, what kind of

new wholeness he might be able to bring to their bodies and communities. Regardless, this unnamed group of five has discerned that what they need is Jesus, and they are determined to get where they need to go.

Enter creativity. Within this group is a man with some level of paralysis in his body – he isn't able to move around the home where they've gathered in quite the same way as other folks. The other four group members have a dilemma. According to Mark's storytelling – characteristically fast paced – they don't spend much time scheming a possible plan. They just get creative – like a child playing pretend, like Vashti's teacher in the children's book. They get creative and take the ceiling tiles off the roof and lower their friend down through the open ceiling and all of a sudden, they have what they need – access to Jesus. They are vulnerable and curious and they take a creative risk and it pays off. They are face-to-face with Jesus. Their creativity has created a moment of belonging.

Jesus responds to this unnamed group of five in a curious way. He looks at the group – sees their curiosity and creativity and vulnerability – and he says to the man who was lowered through the ceiling, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus acknowledges the risk they took for this encounter, and he lets them know that it has paid off.

Their sins – all that separates them from God, all that pulls them away from living in the ways that God desires them to live – are forgiven. They are set on a new path to wholeness, freed to journey onward as those who have met Jesus in this moment of creative belonging.

Of course, this beautiful moment of belonging is also punctuated by the disbelief of some of the folks gathered around Simon Peter’s house that day. I can almost hear their frantic whispers back and forth to one another – “what are those people doing?” “We’ve never done it that way before.” “Who do they think they are, messing with the way things are done?” And some members of the crowd are so disturbed by this moment that they start to

question Jesus – who do you think you are, offering these words of forgiveness? And then Jesus, almost as an afterthought, invites the paralyzed person to get up and walk. And he does. The crowd is astounded. It's official now – we've really never seen anything like this. They all go home glorifying God.

The moment of creativity from those five unnamed people outside Simon Peter's house set in motion a whole narrative of changed hearts and minds, of healing in body and spirit and community. They saw a barrier to belonging – literally, a roof – and they simply removed it. And from that moment, a whole beautiful story spun out. I wonder how many people heard the testimony of those amazed onlookers once they returned to their own neighborhoods.

At our Westminster staff retreat back in mid-August, one of my staff colleagues said something like this: the days of the “we've never done it this way” excuse are officially

over now. We have spent the past year and a half learning new ways of belonging, because we were forced to. And now we know that our capacity for creativity and vulnerability is deeper than we may have realized. That doesn't mean that these past months of pandemic haven't been difficult, because they have. There has been loss both general and deeply personal; there has been isolation that has left us feeling defenseless; many in our communities and neighborhoods have experienced job loss and economic hardship and it's all exacerbated by the injustices that lie close under the surface of our common life. And... we have seen new ways of belonging throughout the pandemic, forged by creativity, vulnerability, and a willingness to stop saying "but we've never done it this way."

I wonder: when you think about creativity and belonging, who comes to mind for you? Do you think of a teacher, or a historical figure, or a saint or ancestor from the Christian tradition? When I think of creativity and belonging, of the

kind of gospel work that those five unnamed people engaged in in today's scripture text, I think of children. I think of the ways that children exude creativity – especially when they are able to be most fully themselves, when they are nurtured in safe spaces of welcome. When children belong, they create belonging for others in brave and kind ways.

Today is a day known across faith traditions in this country as Children's Sabbath. Children's Sabbath is a yearly interfaith observance started by the Children's Defense Fund thirty years ago. This day is an invitation to faith communities to raise awareness around the rights and needs of children, and to give thanks for young people's gifts. Today, I give thanks for the gifts of children's creativity, for the ways that children in our families and neighborhoods model creative belonging and for how children have no need for the "we've never done it this way" excuse.

Here at Westminster, one of the most beautiful rhythms of creativity in our community is the yearly practice of observing Arts Month with our children and youth. Each February, Church School classrooms each participate in a weeks-long art project – the fifth graders create a film, the third graders make puppets, the fourth graders craft beautiful mosaics. And the junior highs for the past several years have worked with church member and visual artist James Nutt to create wonderful collaborative watercolor pieces, many of which hang on the walls around the church building. You'll see one beautiful example as our bulletin cover today. It's also here in the sanctuary – I invite you to take a look as you're leaving today if you're here in the room. James invites our junior highs each year to create art together. As you'd expect, some of our youth would certainly consider themselves artsy types, and many would decidedly not. I talked with James this week about the process of working with the students to create art, and he shared a beautiful story of creative belonging.

James said that one of the difficult parts of the Arts Month projects each year is finding the right balance of collaboration and individual expression. Each student is invited to make their own mark on the piece each week, but as the weeks move along, the layers of paint and ink accumulate and it's a bit harder for the students to tell which parts of color and ink are theirs. One week during the making of this particular piece, a student noticed that the little corner they'd been working on had been obscured by watercolor – someone had added to the piece in a way that made that original corner unrecognizable. This student was really, really bummed – the mark they'd made was no longer theirs. James, arts month facilitator extraordinaire, was able to engage that difficult moment in the classroom in a way that deepened the group's sense of belonging. He invited everyone to come see what had happened with that corner of the painting – look, it's not exactly what it was two weeks ago when it just belonged to one person. But now it's something even more special – it's part of this whole painting that required each of us to

make our own marks and then to come together and be willing to be part of the whole. We can be grateful for our own individual contributions and also recognize that the contributions of others make us better. That morning, our junior highs learned something about how creativity – their teacher’s creativity, their own creativity – creates belonging.

We are thinking and praying and hearing all about belonging this year in worship, and today we remember that sometimes to create belonging, we have to get creative. Just like those five people in Mark’s gospel who lowered a man through the roof; like Vashti’s teacher who encouraged her to just make that first little dot on the page; like James and the junior highs during Arts month; like all the saints and ancestors throughout the story of faith who have made space for their neighbors in unconventional ways; like Jesus, whose path of love and grace teaches us new ways of belonging. May we be like them. Amen.