

“Creative”

- We are so hopeful for the future of First Congregational - who you are and who are becoming I work with many, many churches throughout the United States, and a little bit in Canada, and I find such hope for the witness of this place and your ability to adapt with joy and energy in the next season of your life. I don't see where you all are headed as a time of taking a left turn or adapting to what some might think are sexier church trends, but instead a deepening of who you have been.
- What we are doing in worship is exploring three core values that emerged during our previous time together. They are Curious, Creative and Courageous. The core values will become the basis for decision-making into the future.
- Please join us downstairs for our after-worship conversations
- Steve Hirby is our liaison for questions

Good morning! My name is Dave Harder. I come from Ottawa and have the joy of working with churches helping them transform their property for community impact and reimagine church as a way of being in the neighborhood. I have been loving my first week in Appleton. Mieke and I had so many great conversations and connections that you will hear more about as things unfold. I am going to miss her as she returned home on Thursday. We started our core value series last week with Mieke doing a fantastic job of unpacking the word Curious. Curiosity moving us beyond those we like and love but curious with even our enemy and also presented a new economy, one where health of the community is valued above all else. Today I invite us to look at the second word creative. Now I grew up with a bit of a weird understanding of this word. I thought some people were creative and others were not. I thought I was in the clearly NOT category. I could not paint or draw. Drama was something I lived but not do on stage. I tried music lessons and they ended in tears. So I guess I will be an athlete.

Jesus continually models a new way of being in the world... Are you ready? (can I get a COME ON!) Check this out...

I want to invite you to look at Luke 9 with me - the passage I am going to use to unpack creative.

Luke 9:10-17

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

¹⁰ When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, ¹¹ but the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.

¹² Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.”

¹³ He replied, “You give them something to eat.”

They answered, “We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd.” ¹⁴ (About five thousand men were there.)

But he said to his disciples, **“Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.”** ¹⁵ The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. ¹⁶ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. ¹⁷ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

As Mieke shared last week, when we only look for the obvious in scripture we miss the subversive. What I was taught magnified the miracle of multiplying bread and fish and took it out of the day to day., well I don't envision multiplying bread and fish anytime soon, so what relevance does this story have in my life? I now realize that what I was told about the text missed something very deep about how Jesus is inviting us to live. This new way of being he is establishing in the world.

Now some context... these people have been traveling, they are on a hillside and have come to see and hear Jesus. It is the end of the afternoon. Siting i the heat of the day. And they have not paused to eat. The disciples are seeing the reality of the situation and say... release them so they can get some food. We are tired and hungry so they must be tired and hungry.

Jesus responds by saying YOU FEED THEM.

This is my first noticing - When a need emerges Jesus puts it back on them. This is the essence of co-creating. We see the flip side of this in church all the time... we bring ideas forward NOT for us to do them but for someone else to do them. It is the staff's responsibility. The experts job. Or we get bogged down in bureaucracy and the idea loses its joy before we are given the ok. Jesus will have nothing to do with it. He says YOU FEED THEM!

Sure, Jesus, we will do it (eye roll emoji). **The second noticing is about the magnitude of the need. We can't meet the need alone!** As individuals or as a faith community you notice the needs in the Fox Valley and it can be daunting to say the least. And instead of thinking as creatives (the collective WE) being part of a larger ecosystem of care we think as individuals. It is MY responsibility. It is First Congregational's responsibility. I have to meet the needs of food insecurity. Homelessness. Racism. Gun Violence. The Environment. The need is so great. Thinking it is there responsibility alone. I can imagine the disciples are overwhelmed. What do you mean? They had a different lens than Jesus.

Jesus then models something radical...

He says gosh no, **it is not on you**. Look at all these amazing people, there is more than enough HERE. Break them into groups and let's eat together.

And here is the third noticing - now consider who is on the hillside... Jesus held space for those on the margins, those outside of the welcome of the community and the elite followed him as they were curious. There would have been incredible diversity. Jews and gentiles. Young and old. Gender diversity, Wealthy and poor. All the classes and intersections intermingling. **Jesus invites them to eat a meal with people they would have never eaten with. AND there was no host!** No one was in control. There was no power dynamic. No US and THEM. If Jesus did multiply bread and fish... cool BUT this is a greater miracle! People just being together. A sharing of food and stories, a truly diverse space was created by Jesus, where all belong. People together who would not know one another. Individuals belonging who would have never belonged. Sharing a meal together. WHAT??? This is the way of Jesus. One where a table is created

with people I would never choose to have a meal with and I am not in control or in charge. Just present to be, listen, learn, and love. THAT IS THE ESSENCE OF CREATIVE.

This leads me to the fourth noticing. Who travels as a family all day and doesn't bring food? Often we can see the miracles as magic and miss the true miracle of the moment. This story is in all the gospels with subtle variances. In John this little boy shows up with his lunch ... again pointing to this reality that there was food there. It is not like this little boy was the only one with a lunch that day. But in moments of scarcity we hang on to what we have. I am not sharing. This little boy risks! He brings what he has trusting it is enough. Maybe this little boy starts a chain reaction of generosity. A shared economy. If he can bring what little he has, I can too. The creativity and curiosity of children is something we need to pay attention to... the greater miracle is trusting the little I have, mixed with what you have and what you have and what you have ... we have everything we need right here amongst us! I do not have everything... the need is too great! But I can show up and bring me.

Now the greatest enemy of creativity is control.

I hear from singer songwriters and abstract painters and spoken word poets that how art is received is out of their control. Artists engage in the creative process and then what emerges is shared and how that is received is out of their control. You just put it out there and trust. **What a vulnerable act.** I can't control others perception. I can only share what is created.

AND when you are in control you ask the wrong questions. It stifles the curiosity that leads to creativity.

One narrative is about a smaller and smaller we, it is hierarchical, based on fear and control. Resulting in exploitation. Transaction. Power. The other narrative we see in this miracle is one of BELONGING, the ever expanding WE. Loved, seen, known. Creating together with all our diversity, dreams, and complexities.

If we all feel that what we have is enough and valuable, imagine what it looks like when we bring what we have out of that assurance. Not showing up to consume to exploit, share. They showed up to see Jesus teach... and Jesus always flips it and says the greatest teaching is not listening to my words but modeling this creative, curious, courageous way of love. Lets create a space for belonging, sharing food and stories...learning from the person beside you, who you could have never imagined eating with.

We see very different imaginations of the world here. The dominant cultural narrative, which is not new, we see it here in the text, sets out to separate. To create distance between us, one another and the land. It is a narrative of separation and segregation. Here on the hillside, we see a new way of being. One of sharing, diversity, hospitality. Creativity! **That you are enough, just as you are, and you have something valuable to share and to offer.**

Welcome and Inclusion have been an important party of this community, but what we have heard is a desire to go deeper... inclusion says you can come to my table, enter through the open door... but here are the rules and this is how we do things here; I really hope you fit in. You are a guest. The norms are set. The biases are in place. Don't step out of bounds. **Belonging is different.** It is not driven by control, you can't predict the outcome, it is a beautiful mess. Imagine the chaos on the hillside. More than 5000 eating together. Belonging is about co-creating it together. It is an "our". We are making it together with our hopes and dreams, gifts, and strengths. Oh my it will be messy but it will be ours.

Jesus recognized on the hillside that day that what was needed was not more words. It was seeing a moment to model a whole new way of being. One where everyone belongs. Everyone's gifts accepted and valued. Everyone sitting in an equitable space where no one is in control. What will be is because of us creating it.

Creativity is about imagining new ways of being in the world with others.
It is about moving to the multitude drawn together in all our diversity.
It is about bringing the little I have and trusting it is enough.
Knowing that my little bit, mixed with your little bit and yours and yours is now multiplied.
No control. No hierarchy. Just US...and in the us trusting it is enough.

I thought I was not a creative. But early on I loved cooking. Entering contests. Creating cook books. Winning the athlete of the year and the Home-Ec award. But no one framed for me cooking as art. It wasn't until my 40s I realized I create in the kitchen, and I recognized my art as a space maker, holding space for all to belong and cocreate a way of being together. Whether around the table or at my local coffee shop.

Reflect on these questions...

What do you bring?

Where are the spaces you feel you can show up as your full authentic self? Not controlling but just being.

Listen and reflect as I read the Value Creative...

Creative: We are seed gatherers and garden tenders; made in the image of our Creator to co-create. We know that not every seed will take root, and still we plant. In each seed we know there is possibility; and so we pour our creativity into nurturing the ground—turning, watering, letting in the light, and doing whatever we can to cultivate the good soil in which new growth can take hold and thrive.

My Prayer for you in closing

Beware of the dream-drouising
Innovation - draining
Creativity - smothering
Possibility - limiting
Voice of reasonableness

BECOME

Dream nourishing
Innovation unlocking
Creativity catapulting
Possibility expanding
Voice of unreasonableness for others

Sermon preached by Dave Harder at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, July 17, 2022 at 9:30 AM