



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

July 16, 2017 – “The Power of Popsicles” (Psalm 139:1-5, Matthew 10:40-42)
 Rev. Jennie Sankey

When you eat a cold, sugary popsicle on a hot sunny day, where does your mind go?

I remember feeling giddy as a 6 year old eating a rainbow Bluebell popsicle in the hospital, my parents by my side, after have sinus surgery. I remember giggling uncontrollably during hot TX summers at the terrible jokes on the Popsicle brand sticks. I remember the first time I had a gourmet popsicle from Atlanta’s own King of Pops, and how my husband and I savored those rich, creamy delights on the Decatur square. Popsicles have the power to change your mood, cool your temperature, refresh your energy, bring childhood memories to the surface and turn your mouth an unnatural blue. Popsicles aren’t something you eat often eat alone. They’re a treat that celebrates a sweet shared moment. So you can imagine our groups delight on our recent Middle School mission trip, when we were informed we’d be bringing a cooler filled to the brim with a rainbow of icy popsicles with us for our day of “work.” And popsicles brought a sweet message into our lives: If I want to make space for God in my life, I’ve got to make room for popsicles. I mean people. Or maybe both?

Mike Hayden, myself, and 7 middle school youth traveled to Raleigh, NC the last week of June for a mission immersion trip. The theme was “Creating Space.” Sounds kind of like the title of a new HGTV show. One where you personalize a room for someone based on their tastes and needs, or maybe one where you re-do backyards to make the perfect space for the next family party.

Before the trip, we had a meeting with youth and parents, and talked about our expectations for the trip. One person was sure that we would be building a house. I mean, what better way to create space for someone than building a house, right?

Spoiler alert: We didn’t build a house.

Here’s what we did do:

- Helped prepare, serve, and clean up lunch for 291 men, women and children.

- Played cornhole, ate cupcakes, and danced with elderly adults at a Ruth Sheets Adult Care Center
- Scrubbed and tidied a Family Promise Day center/transitional housing site
- Bagged thousands of cucumbers at the Food Bank
- Delivered food to low-income residents of Raleigh.
- Handed out water and snacks to anyone we met walking around the city
- Invited people to our lawn parties in downtown Raleigh and at Healing Transitions, an addiction recovery center, where we talked, played games, and slurped on popsicles together.

We didn't physically build anything for anyone. Instead we practiced the words of Jesus as heard in our gospel reading today. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And whoever welcomes you welcomes the one who sent me." We spent time with people, helping, listening, and learning. We spent the week creating space in our lives for the people in the surrounding community, welcoming some and being welcomed by others. And in those spaces, we recognized God.

It's easy to hear Jesus' words as a general call to care for the poor, the hungry, the "little ones," the "least of these." But that's not all these verses are. When these words were spoken by Jesus, they had a specific audience-Jesus' 12 disciples. At the end of his instructions of how to travel, what to say, where to stay, and how to act as they go out and spread the word about Jesus, he closes with these words about welcome and reward. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." In our busy lives, we often yearn for more space-space to rest, space to play, space to commune with God. This theme came out in the reflections of our middle schoolers. When asked what in their lives they needed more space for, over half said, "God." I hope that as they continue to reflect on our trip together, they start to see how they can make space for God without feeling guilty about forgetting to pray at night, or not reading the Bible often enough, or skipping Sunday school. When we make space for people, we've made space for God. When we welcome the disciples, the prophet, the righteous, the "little one," we've welcomed God into our midst. We've "made space" in our lives for our loving ever present God, who was already right next to us.

I always struggle when Jesus talks about this whole reward business, and one starts to wonder-how do we know when we're welcoming a prophet? Is the prophet's reward better than the righteous reward? It seems like we getting a list of "how to get rich" in the 3rd century hospitality business. But I don't think Jesus is talking about three groups of people who might come by. And I don't think he's talking about any monetary or even heavenly reward. In these verses the "prophets," the "righteous," and the "Little

ones” aren’t different people—they are different parts of who Christ is, and they are different aspects of what it means to follow him. He’s talking about discipleship. Prophets proclaim God’s words and demonstrate God’s power. Righteous people pursue justice and work towards reconciliation of relationships. “little ones” demonstrate vulnerability and dependence on God’s power and presence. This is how Jesus lived, and what we are called to do as Jesus’ followers. These instructions are to be heard by the disciples, but also by those who will be receiving them into their homes, their families, their communities. They are instructions for the Fellowship Committee, the Facilities committee, the Personnel committee, the Worship committee, and the CE committee. These are instructions for each one of us in our seats today. When we welcome a disciple, we welcome Jesus. When we are welcomed, we embody God’s presence. We are rewarded by knowing God’s presence in those we welcomed and in the welcome that we offer. We are rewarded in the relationships we form when we share a popsicle together. And when we welcome God, we learn a little more about being Jesus’ disciple.

In serving food at Shepherd’s Table, we learned about different roles disciples play—upon arrival at this soup kitchen, one of the volunteer coordinators noticed Noah’s cast. He’d broken his hand the day before the trip. She looked at him and said, “he can’t help.” What she meant was that because of his cast, he couldn’t share in the foodservice, but it came across in a way that felt hurtful. Noah couldn’t help cut fruit or wash dishes that day, but he did become the official greeter and giver of hand wipes as people entered the florescent cafeteria to sit down for a hot lunch. Noah the disciple welcomed Christ 291 times that day, as each person came through the doors.

In a game of cornhole, and to the tune of music from the 70’s, we played and danced with disciples at Ruth Sheet’s Day Center. Our youth helped as each person at the day center came forward to toss 3 beanbags at the board. With each slap of the board, slip through the hole, or miss, cheers erupted in the room. Good job, Red! Way to go Chuck! We celebrated a game well played, and the birthday of one of the visitors to the center with strawberry cupcakes and table talk. Stayin’ Alive blasted from the boombox, when Red couldn’t take it anymore. She boogied up from her chair and out into the middle, and was quickly joined by friends. We looked at each other and jumped up too! Even the middle school boys danced when the conga line started. These wise disciples welcomed us not only with a smile, but with the twist.

We met a young disciple at Family Promise. It was special for us to get to visit a Family Promise day center, as many of our youth remembered helping with Family Promise when we hosted people upstairs in this building. We were given the task of cleaning and scrubbing the community room—getting marks

off the doors and walls, scrubbing the tile, and cleaning old crayon marks and PB and J off the tables. No sooner did we pulled out the first sponge did Kayden, age 3, join us in our cleaning. While his mom cared for his little sister, Kayden got to business, darting around the room, scrubbing the walls, the floor, the couch. He'd run back to the sink and say "more water!" so he could keep going. We giggled and smiled with him, until his mom called him away. Kayden the disciple welcomed us into his space and showed us how it was done.

We met a disciple in Moores Square on Thursday. Najee joined us for to play Uno. He told us about the recovery program he was in, and soundly whooped us in cards. After downing a few popsicles, he said he had to go, but first paused to share some wisdom with us. He told our youth to "keep loving and trusting God." He shared that he knew, despite his circumstances, that "God will always believe in you and will always be there for you. Even if you don't know God is there, He will be," Najee preached. Just when we thought we were getting the hang of being disciple ourselves, we realized we were simply the guests of another.

We got to live out Jesus' words, "whoever gives even a cup of cold water..." by not only giving out water, but by inviting people into a space we created by the power of God and the help of a popsicle. We disciples gave out sticky, sweet, rainbow colored, icy cold treats on a warm June day and heard a message from God. If we wanted space for God in our lives, we had to make room for people, and let others make room for us. It wasn't just any kind of welcoming we practiced-it was a welcome that savored time together, and shared the creation of a space-a space to be who we were, surrounded by God's presence.

We didn't go to Raleigh to create space by building a house, or organizing and designing the perfect room. We went to Raleigh to hand out popsicles. To share a cold cup of water with other disciples, to welcome the God who goes with us everywhere, who lays a hand upon us, always before and behind us. And we came back to share it with you. Start with a popsicle after worship. See what kind of space God can create around you as you welcome and are welcomed, savoring a moment together.