

## Is there any room in the inn for misfit toys?

a Christmas Day sermon by J. R. Luck, 2011  
Peace UCC, Greensboro, NC

Let me start by just saying how very proud I am of you as a church. Not one of you in the last 10 months - not ONE - has asked me if we were going to cancel worship this morning. It never even occurred to David Fespermann and the consistory to consider canceling services. And yes, while most churches in Greensboro are worshipping, many larger churches in larger cities are not. Let me read to you from a CBS news affiliate in Atlanta: "Some metro Atlanta churches have decided to close their doors Sunday so that members and staff can spend time with their families Christmas Day. 'I believe that church takes place where Christians gather,' said Buckhead Church Member Carol McKown."

I don't know about you, but I'm confused. First, can you imagine any church saying, let's close our doors Easter Sunday so that members and staff can spend time with their families Easter Day? Of course not, and yet, it's okay to say that about Christmas. What's that about? But more importantly, and I'll admit this may rub some of you the wrong way, since when has Christmas been about family? I must confess that I am weary of non-practicing Christians talking about this day being important because it's about family. NO, Christ's mass is not about family, but about the incarnation of God in human flesh in the form of an infant, who, when he grew into adulthood would teach, and I quote "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters cannot be my disciple." I'll bet you... I don't know, \$10,000 that not one presidential candidate quotes that passage this election year. This same adult when told that his mother and brothers are waiting for him, responds, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Speaking of which, where were the grandmothers, and aunts and sisters when it was time for Mary to deliver? They were, after all, in Joseph's ancestral home in a day and age when family meant everything. But the text shows no interest in them. None. But, while the gospels show no interest in the biological family, they are obsessed with the idea of a new family.

Let me explain. Let's go back to Buckhead Church in Atlanta. They want their members and staff to spend time with family. So here's a question: what happens if you don't have any family? What happens if you're divorced or separated or estranged? Every church I have pastored has had adult children estranged from their parents and parents estranged from their adult children. What do they do at Christmas? What happens when you outlive all your family and all your friends? What do they do, alone, while everyone else is celebrating family on December 25? There are 15,000 members at Buckhead Church in Atlanta. Are you telling me that not one of them needed worship this morning; that not one of the 15,000 needed the fellowship of brothers and sisters in the Christian faith?

And Jesus said: Who are my mother and my brothers? And then he answers his question by birthing the strangest family we've ever known. In a world that defined family by the identity of the man and the oldest son, followers of the child born today were identified by their inclusion of men and women, especially in the earliest church. In a world that was defined by social class with property owners and slaves, the followers of the child born today would include both owners and slaves worshipping side by side as

equals. In a world that was defined by race and nationalism, the followers of the child born today would become a pentecostal fellowship made up of believers of all languages, races, and nations. A world that divides people into the pure and unpure had no room for lepers, Samaritans, the sick, Romans, and other untouchables. But the child born today would touch lepers, share water with Samaritans, embrace the sick and his followers would do likewise.

Yes, Christmas is supposed to be about family; a family of misfit toys. As I told the kids, in the story of Rudolph the Red-nosed reindeer, there is an island filled with misfits. Each night King Moonracer, a lion, flew all over the world in search of unwanted toys. Over the years that island had become home for a spotted elephant, a water gun that squirted jam, a cowboy that rode an ostrich, a bird that swam, a Charlie in the box, a train with square wheels, a boat that sank, an airplane that couldn't fly. No wonder a reindeer with a glowing nose and an elf that wanted to be a dentist fit right in. Now while I don't know who originally wrote the story, I do know that Scripture speaks of the Lion of Judah, which, in Christian tradition refers to Jesus. And what did the Lion of Judah do? He created a family of unwanted toys; toys unwanted because of gender, or race, or social class, or health, or occupation and he welcomed them into this community that we now call the church and loved each of them as his very own.

It all started in a misfit land amongst a misfit people when a child was born to a misfit mother pregnant before she was married. A proper man would have dismissed her, even if only quietly. But Joseph forsakes tradition because he won't forsake her. In his own way, he too is a misfit. And who arrived for the birth? Misfits. More specifically, shepherds - bedouin. On the back page of your bulletin there are two pictures I took from the bus on the road to Jericho. Those are pictures of a bedouin shepherding community. These are the people personally invited to Jesus' birth. Not exactly a who's who crowd. After their departure, Jesus' story would soon include Simeon and Anna who, at their age, could only be misfits. Soon other misfits arrived. Foreign, illegal immigrant magicians and star watchers traveled to see the Christ child. And then, for a number of years, Jesus dwelt as a refugee in Africa with other misfit, refugee families. With that kind of childhood, is it any wonder that as an adult Jesus would associate with misfits while ministering to misfits?

That's our narrative; our story as followers of the Christ child. But here's the tragedy folks. The world no longer sees the church as a refuge for misfits. The world sees a club where the who's who belongs: those with means; those with proper clothes; those who can afford building like this; those whose parents attended; those who believe; those who already know the Lord's prayer; those who know the creeds and the Mercersburg Catechism; those without questions; those who haven't embarrassed the family; those who are pure; those who haven't sinned; those who have their act together. Oh, I know it's not true, but this is how the world sees us. Rightly or wrongly - and its some of both - we have become everything the child born today was not.

And in the mean time, and I do mean the mean time, the world is filled with misfit toys who desperately want to be wanted this Christmas; they desperately want a family or at least an island refuge where they can fellowship with other misfits. And who are these misfits? Some believe they are misfits because they deeply love a person of their own gender. Some believe they are misfits because they are single or divorced, or estranged. Some believe they are misfit because when it comes to church and God and faith, they

have question after question and doubt after doubt. Some believe they are misfit because they don't know how to pray. Some believe they are misfit because they have, shall we say "a history." Some believe they are misfit because they have been violated and sexually abused and are anything but the virgin that so many Christians hold up as a defining standard.

So tell me Peace Church, is this an island where misfit toys can belong? Is this a family where misfit toys will be called brother and sister? Will they discover their true identities here as precious and beloved children of the Lion King of Judah?

In Mexico on the 9 days before the 24th of December, Christians reenact the biblical story of Mary and Joseph looking for a place in which the holy child can come into this world. During these pasadas, the peregrinos, or the pilgrims, go to a house seeking admission from the dark of night. But they will be turned away. They will seek out a second house in hopes that they will make room for the Christ Child to be born there. But once again there will be no room in the inn. Only when they come to the third home will the hosts make room for the Christ Child and all the pilgrims will be welcomed inside.

Folks, there are peregrinos throughout the Triad, looking for a place that will make room for them. They are looking for a home, a family, an island of misfit toys. But according to statistics and testimony after testimony after testimony, these modern day pilgrims are not finding rooms in the inn. There are very, very few rooms for people with questions; for those not good enough; for misfits with tattoos and piercings. Is it really any wonder they seek out the stables amidst bars, libraries, coffee shops and cyberspace?

I am convinced that churches that welcome and make room for these peregrinos will grow in this century. Churches that embrace their mission to offer radical hospitality to the stranger and a hearty welcome to the misfit will grow because such churches will become nothing less than birthing places for the Christ child and his family of misfits. I guess Buckhead Church is right... this is about family after all. And so I will ask again, is Peace Church a family where misfit toys can belong? Is this an inn where the Christ Child can be born as his misfit brethren welcomed?

In all likelihood, you will find your new pastor in 2012 and you may enter a new era of ministry. I pray that the spirit will bless you that you might see and imagine at least some of just what might be possible for an island of misfit toys and for an inn that makes room for all of God's children. After all, scripture calls such a place, the Kingdom of God. Amen.