

"I am a nerd." Those were the first words out of my mouth the first time I stood here five years ago. They are as true today as they were then. More specifically, though, I'm a word nerd.

I learned at an early age to love crossword puzzles, followed quickly by learning to judge people who use pencils, not pens, to complete them. You've got to be bold enough to believe you won't make a mistake. I get an embarrassing amount of satisfaction when coming up with the answer to a really vague or puzzling or punny clue. Again, I am a nerd.

What I love most is how many different clues the folks who create them can come up with for the same word and how many words can be the answer to so many different clues.

And what I love about crossword puzzles is the same thing that I love about our scriptures: that God uses all these different words to paint a picture for us of who God is calling us to be. And the thread, the theme, that connects these words across the scriptures is that God repeatedly calls us to be different. To stand apart. To use our time, our resources differently than others.

As far as I can tell, though, God never once uses the word "different" to tell us what to be. That's because different, in any language, is one of the most meaningless words. All it means is that something is not something else. It tells us nothing about the qualities that make them so.

God doesn't tell us to be different as much God, over and over and over, shows us what being different looks like. Case in point: this parable Jesus tells about a landowner who paid his workers the same amount of money even though they labored for varying amounts of time.

Talk about being different! This appears to be a very troubling way of being different. Unfair. Unjust. Maybe even immoral, illegal, and downright unkind. None of us read this and think those folks who showed up in the morning got a fair shake.

But, like so much of scripture, this story isn't about us. It's about God. We might learn who we're supposed to be here, but moreover we learn about who God is. Because this isn't a story about what we earn. It's about what God values.

We value production. We value compensation. We don't just value the hours we put into a project. We value the years of service and letters behind and titles in front of our names. The more time we put into something - our work, our church, our community - the more we expect to get in return. The more we think we deserve. The more weight we want our voice to carry.

God doesn't give a rip about that. God does not agree with what we value. God values something deeper. And don't get mad at me for saying so. Take it up with Jesus.

Above all, God values our presence. The only way to explain these folks getting paid the same is that God does not care what we accomplish. God cares that we show up and participate.

If God cared about what we accomplished or earned or produced, God would have loved the Golden Calf and the Tower of Babel. God would have demanded the Israelites build a Temple long before Solomon was born. God would have gone missing when it got destroyed. And God wouldn't not have showed up on earth to become a penniless, houseless, traveling teacher who got killed by the people who earned their titles and accomplished difficult tasks.

But God rebuked the Golden Calf and took them away from the Tower of Babel. God did not abandon the people when the Temple was destroyed. And God came into our lives 180 degrees from where any of us expected.

It is so hard for us to understand how much more God values presence over production because of how much we desperately believe in merit. That there is always something we can do or must do to earn something we want.

If we hold to the idea that we earn anything in God's kingdom or that we all have differing worth to the life of this community because of when we showed up, we will continue to build a well-oiled organization, but it will never become the church God intended. Not the kind of community Jesus envisioned. Not one that was set apart, unique, dare I say: different.

When I first came here, we had a billboard telling the world that Jesus loved everybody and so do we. Some of you are here today because of that billboard. Some of you were responsible for that billboard. And a lot of us still believe that it's important that we say that.

If we say we love everybody, just like Jesus, then we have to value everybody just like Jesus. We have to value each other's presence above everything. Not each other's opinions or accomplishments. Each other's presence. We have to value the participation of those who just showed up as much as we do those who came early. Maybe even more. There is no clearer picture in all of scripture of how God calls us to be different than this.

The thing I like least about crossword puzzles is when they don't add up. When there is some quirk where several squares are supposed to have two letters in them or the same letter is missing from several of the solutions. Crossword puzzles are supposed to follow convention.

A few weeks ago in the Justice class, several of us shared that when we first came here, we couldn't make sense of this place. It didn't add up. But even though we couldn't make sense of it all, it felt right. It felt better than where we'd been before.

We are closest to God's vision for the kingdom when what we do and who we are doesn't square with the world around us, when what we value is not the same as the world around us. When we are different and our lives and our structures and our actions prove it.

So let's value what God values. Let's love how God loves. Let's allow our lives to give shape to what being different looks like wherever God leads us. Amen.