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## Sermon

When I was in high school, you pretty much knew from the time you walked in the doors on the first day of your freshman year, where you would belong. Every one of us had been tested in grade 8, and that testing helped determine how we were tracked. Our high school had four tracks. The highest track was the gifted level. This is where the brainers went. The next track was advanced. This is where you went if you expected to go to university and become a professional. The next track was general. This is where you went if you were likely to go to a community college and learn a trade, like being a secretary or a mechanic. The final track was Basic. This was the track for kids who would be lucky to finish high school.

Officially, the tracking determined only what classes you took. But informally, as you can probably imagine, the tracking influenced everything! It defined who your friends were. It defined where your locker was, and where you sat during lunch. It determined where you hung out between classes, what you did on the weekends, who you dated and what extracurricular activities you got involved in. Who do you think filled student council? Do you think it was the basic students, or even the general students? No. Student council was filled with kids from advanced and gifted. Most of the sports teams were filled from advanced level. Gifted kids joined the math and computer clubs, and were often the yearbook editors.

In effect, what happened is that you slowly separated from kids who weren't in your track. In grade 8, everyone was still in the same classroom, together, and so your friendships weren't so defined by how smart you were. But in grade 9, that changed. I started grade 9 hanging out with my old friends, most of whom landed in general track, but by the end of grade 9, that was over. We ended up in completely different circles.

Your track even defined what drugs you did, if you did them. The kids in the gifted and advanced levels drank. The kids in general drank and smoked and did pot. The kids in basic did everything, from alcohol to narcotics. If you wanted a cigarette, you knew to go to the railway tracks, which were two feet past the school property line, because that's where the general kids hung out. If you wanted something more heavy duty, you went to the basic kids' hangout behind the auto shop. When the cops got called, you knew which wing they got sent to. I don't ever remember an advanced or gifted kid's locker getting searched for drugs.

There was also a real difference in what was expected of kids, based on their track. For instance, when a girl in general or basic level got pregnant, it really wasn't considered a big deal, almost like no one expected any better of her. And if the guy who got her pregnant didn't get to go to college, well, he probably wasn't going anyways. But if a girl in advanced or gifted got pregnant, which happened, everybody talked about it like it was a huge tragedy. Would she drop out of school?

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Would he get to go to college? It was like they didn't just let themselves down, they let down everyone else.

As you can probably tell, this tracking thing had a class component to it. The kids who were middle class were usually tracked into advanced or gifted. Working class kids ended up in general, and kids who came from deep poverty, often found themselves in basic. And if you happened to be in a track that didn't fit your class, so if you were a working class kid who managed to get into the advanced level, you would likely not end up with the cool kids. You still didn't fit and you still might not make it.

As teenagers, I don't know that many of us questioned this at all, or really understood consciously what was happening. But I believe that subconsciously, we knew exactly what the deal was. We all knew our place. And even if we didn't like it, we knew why some kids counted and some didn't. We knew who would be on student council and we knew who would be standing by the tracks smoking during lunch hour. And we knew, deep down, that something was very wrong with this picture, that you shouldn't have to lose your friends in grade 9 because they were in a different track, and that it was just as tragic when a poor girl got pregnant as when a middle class girl got pregnant, but we said nothing, because most of us wanted to fit in, because we didn't want to lose our place, because we wanted to belong. I think we knew deep down that if we challenged the status quo, if we questioned the way we were divided and how we divided ourselves, that we would end up on the outside, with no one and nothing, without a people to call our own.

As human beings, we want to know where we belong. We need to have our tribe. We need to know who our people are, and it's been like this since we evolved into the species we are today. This is normal and it's natural. You have to know who you can count on, and your close ones have to know that they can count on you. This is so basic to our need for safety and security, and this is why loyalty is so important, and as a species, we have needed it to survive in so many ways – economically, socially, psychologically, spiritually. But, there is a problem when our tribal affiliations blind us and keep us from seeing the richness of the human condition and welcoming it into our lives. There is a problem when we make our tribe too small.

I want to tell you a story, one that many of you have probably heard, but I want to tell it in a way that can give not only the story new life, but us as well. It comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 14, and it's actually one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted stories in the Christian scriptures. Jesus is travelling and the crowds that follow him are getting larger and larger. One evening he's having dinner and he tells the guests that when they throw a feast, they should not invite their friends or relatives or neighbors, because they would return the favor. Instead, they should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, because they can't return the favor, therefore it is a true invitation. Then he leaves the dinner and goes to the crowd that has been traveling with him. And he tells them that in order to follow him they have to hate their mother and father, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even life itself. Only then can they follow him and be his disciple.

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The traditional way this story has been interpreted is to tell us that Jesus has to be the most important person in your life that we should be prepared to leave behind everything to be faithful to him. This interpretation has been the justification for centuries of religious abusive. It has been used to justify missionaries who left their families to work in the mission field. Scott Roeder, the man who assassinated the abortion doctor, George Tiller, used this interpretation to justify abandoning his wife and son and dedicating his life to ending abortion. Most literal interpretations of scripture are simplistic and dangerous. Interpreted literally, this story is horrible. But, if you look at the story in terms of the cultural context in which Jesus lived, it gains a meaning that many of us have never considered.

In Jesus' time, your primary loyalty was to your family. Every decision you made had to reflect that loyalty. To have loyalty to anyone outside of your family was considered disrespectful and shameful. If being loyal to your family meant someone else's family had to suffer, so be it. The world was an us and them place, with most of it categorized as them, and your own small circle being the us.

It was also a society based on status. You worked within the vast network of family loyalties and built up status by accumulating obligations that you could use to your family's benefit. Everything you did for someone became a favor, and you gained status, and you could call back in those favors when you wanted. You tried to make it so that more favors were owed to you than you owed to others, and that's how you built up status. So there was a lot of tension, because everyone was trying to be higher than everyone else, which means that someone always had to lose, someone had to be more obligated. Nothing was for free. Nothing was unconditional. Nothing could be true generosity.

Jesus saw this as a prison, that this web of family loyalties and obligations had created a social network so tight that it held everyone in bondage. They only saw their small circle. They couldn't see beyond it.

Jesus' central message was twofold. One, you had to expand your tribe. Everyone was your tribe. Two, you had to wipe the slate clean and stop keeping track of who owed what, because it was keeping people from true authentic relationships and turned people into transactions. It was dehumanizing.

Do you know the story of Jesus turning water into wine in the Gospel of John Chapter 2? Jesus goes to a wedding, and they've run out of wine. His mother asks him to turn water into wine and he tells her no, that he was here for a different reason. And Mary responds by pulling out the "loyalty to your tribe" card. "You must do this because I'm your mother." Because what would she gain? The wedding family would be indebted to her family, and she would gain status. She was inside the tracking system of her culture, trying to use her son's power for her benefit. And Jesus said no, the gifts I have been given by God are not going to be used that way! However, he caved in, because even he felt the pull so strongly of that tracking system he had been raised in, and he relented, turning the water into wine.

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What he learned that night was how difficult his message was going to be to follow. He was asking people to step out of the tracking, to expand their tribe, to risk their families accusing them of betrayal. He was asking them to step away from all the status they had painstakingly worked to acquire, and to see everyone as a mother and father, as sisters and brothers, as family.

This morning, ten of you made the decision to join the tribe that is Emerson UU Chapel. What does it mean to make this your tribe? How do we balance the human need for belonging, with the spiritual calling to see the whole human race as our family? This can never be a tribe that is closed, that becomes a social club or an inwardly focused group of friends. Yesterday morning, the new greeter team met to talk about welcoming those who come in search of a religious home, and one of the things we explored was how to invite the entire congregation into the practice of hospitality. When a member of the greeter team introduces you to a guest, that is your invitation into the spiritual practice of hospitality. You may be talking to a friend, you may be engaging in committee work during coffee hour! (I know none of you would do that!) It doesn't matter, that can all wait, because it is a sacred honor to accept the invitation.

Expanding our tribe isn't just about what happens here on Sunday mornings. Our congregational life is like a rehearsal for the work that we are asked to do when we leave these protective walls. We are tracked and we track other people in so many ways – at school, at work, in our families, in our neighborhoods. The lure of our modern status systems, which manipulate our need for belonging, are very strong. Like Mary, we keep trying to turn water into wine so that we don't have to change. The art of hospitality is about stepping out of the ways we track and are tracked, and into the promise that Jesus offered us – that you will be liberated from bondage when you expand your tribe. When you live as if everyone is mother and father, brother and sister, the spirit will move through you and you will see the face of God in everything. And you will be home and you will belong in a larger way than you could ever imagine. May it be so. Amen and blessed be.