

This morning we are coming close to the end of our journey through the Dark Wood.¹ The Dark Wood being that place in our lives where we might feel lost or empty of full of doubt or are simply struggling. We have been looking at the different gifts we may find when we awake in the Dark Wood of life. This morning we are joined on our journey by a band of misfits. A misfit is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a person whose behavior or attitude sets them apart from others in an uncomfortable conspicuous way.” In most contexts, the word misfit is intended as an insult. Human culture throughout time often values conformity over individualism. It is the oddball who gets picked on at school or is ignored in social gatherings. Even in churches, where we proclaim a call to love our neighbor, even the misfit neighbor, we are guilty of giving lip service to that love. I’m pretty sure Jesus never said, “Love your neighbor as long as they conform to society’s expectations.”

When we are traveling through the Dark Wood, it is misfits who are best suited for the journey. Eric Elnes states in the *Gifts of the Dark Wood* podcast, “When the world is broken, why wouldn’t one want to be a misfit?”² Why wouldn’t you want to be set apart by your attitude or behavior when the status quo is unjust and full of greed? Why wouldn’t you want to be considered unusual if the “usual” is corrupt? Well, as we move from the celebration of Palm Sunday to the darkness of Good Friday we get an idea of the risk involved in being a misfit.

¹ Sermon Series based on the book *Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (and Other Wanderers)* by Eric Elnes. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2015.

² Episode 8 “The Gifts of Misfits Part One” accessed at www.darkwoodbrew.com on March 19, 2016.

Jesus was the ultimate misfit. He challenged the religious and cultural norms of the day to such a degree and with such vigor that those in power saw no other option than to put him to death. But Jesus wouldn't have been such a threat to the religious and political establishment had he been a lone voice. The power of Jesus' ministry relied on a band of fellow misfits who walked alongside him on the journey. These disciples and other followers caught a glimpse of the kin-dom of God that Jesus sought to make a reality on earth. A kin-dom in which the hungry, the grieving, and the merciful are blessed. A kin-dom in which those who are usually rejected for being unclean or sinful or otherwise unfit for good company are the ones Jesus seeks out and proclaims God's love for them.

These misfits line the road on what we now call Palm Sunday - shouting Hosanna, waving palm branches, and laying down their cloaks to proclaim Jesus as the true King of their lives. A king whose power does not come from force and strength but from compassion and love. They proclaim their devotion to a lowly carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth and in doing so, they thumb their noses at the religious establishment as well as at Caesar and the political powers of the day. This was not a safe thing to do. Challenging the status quo rarely is. It can be much more comfortable to just let things remain the way they are.

The Dark Wood calls us to challenge our own personal status quo. In his book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, Eric Elnes writes that there are countless processes in our lives

that “seek to tame the wild energy inside you... While this energy is a direct gift from the Spirit, these processes will attempt to shape your life until it is palatable to the masses...” (Elnes, 155) These are processes like the way we go to school, the way we are employed, the way we engage in politics, even the way we worship. But God calls to embrace the wild energy and to live a wholehearted life. A life we most often have the opportunity to discover when we find ourselves in the Dark Wood. Yet, if we attempt to travel through the Dark Wood of life alone, the journey becomes even more difficult. Our ability to hear the low rolling thunder of God’s voice over the noise of the world is more likely if we travel through the Dark Wood with our own community of fellow misfits.

Earlier I read the Oxford Dictionary definition of misfit. In the context of journeying through the Dark Wood, Elnes defines a misfit as “someone who is being as intentional as you are about embracing the gifts of the Dark Wood and finding their place in this world...” People who “swim against the current” in a world “absorbed by materialism, mass-market consumerism, ‘religitation,’ and quick fixes.” Ideally we have three types of misfits in our lives. Those who serve as mentors, those who make up a small band of travelling companions on our journey and those who make up a misfit community of faith. Resisting the pressure to tame our wild energies and having the courage to seek out the path that brings us most alive, is difficult. We need fellow travelers on the journey. We need people with whom we can share our successes and our disasters, our joys and our fears and who will share theirs with us. Elnes compares these people to a campfire that not only provides warmth and comfort, but also illumination. (Elnes, 160) These misfit travelers help us to see the path through the wood more clearly.

Our misfit companions will not be perfect. Just as the disciples of Jesus were not perfect. Far from it. But even in the imperfection we can find clarity. Sometimes it is in hearing something that doesn't fit for us that we figure out our true path.

These misfit companions don't often simply show up in our lives willing to make the journey with us. These relationships must be sought out and cultivated. Neither are they only for our benefit. We must also be willing companions through the Dark Wood of others. If we open ourselves to this journey, to the call of the Spirit and find a few misfits to join us in our vulnerability along this path, we may indeed find a sense of wholeheartedness that comes when body, soul and the call of the Spirit converge. Elnes writes that "some call this convergence point their place in this world. Others call it the kingdom of God." (Elnes 168)

Time of Reflection

Each week during Lent we have taken time to reflect, accompanied by music. This last week, you are invited to write on the thank-you note provided you. Thank someone who has been part of your "misfit" community—someone who has been with you at times in the Dark Wood journey of your life.