When I was in college, I spent three summers working at a United Methodist camp in North Georgia, a place for both developmentally typical kids and youth and adults with disabilities. We had chapel every morning and evening, with a group of campers and their counselors taking leadership of each worship service. And every Thursday morning was reserved for the camp for disabled adults. It was usually the most meaningful service of the week.

I will never forget a morning chapel that these campers led one week, in which one of their counselors narrated the book, “You Are Special,” by Max Lucado, while the campers acted it out. We read this book at the All Church Retreat this past summer. But if you don’t know it, the book is about a group of wooden people called Wemmicks. The Wemmicks go around all day giving each other gray dots and gold stars – gold stars for special talents and impressive things, sometimes just for already having so many gold stars… and gray dots for chipped paint or falling down or just generally being unimpressive. A young boy named Punchinello is frustrated by the gray dots that others keep sticking on him – until one day he meets a girl who has no dots and no stars at all. He asks how she got this way, and she tells him to go talk to Eli, the woodcarver, the one who made him. Through conversations with Eli, Punchinello begins to realize that he was created with intention and love and grace, and Eli’s love for him outweighs any dots or stars that anyone else can give. And at the end of the story, Punchinello starts to believe, finally, that he is special just because he was created by the woodcarver, not because of any dots or stars that others deem appropriate for him. And when he does that, when he starts to believe that he’s worthy of love just because of who he is, not because of anything he’s done, the dots start to fall off – they won’t stick to him anymore.

And as these campers portrayed the story, a man in his late 30’s with Downs Syndrome played the part of Punchinello. He had the emotions and facial expressions down perfectly, as he showed his frustration that the world kept putting labels on him – mostly gray dots. And then he talked to his Maker and started to believe that he was special just the way he was, and that he was made with intention and love. And I will never forget the image of this camper standing in the middle of the chancel of that stone chapel, taking a gray dot that had been taped to his shirt and letting it flutter to the ground. I looked down the row at my campers, whose faces were all streaked with tears, because they had forgotten until that moment… they had forgotten that they were special, too, that they mattered to the One in whose very image they were created, that no labels anyone put on them could ever change that, that they were part of the very creation of the world, an important piece in God’s plan.

We all need these reminders: one of the greatest fears we face is the fear of not mattering, the fear that if we disappeared, it wouldn’t make a difference, and no one would really care. We fear that our lives don’t make any difference – that at the end, the world will be no better and no worse because of us. We fear that no one cares, because we aren’t really worth caring about. Or maybe right now you’re thinking, “Oh, I don’t have an issue with this: I matter a great deal!” and the issue is that you don’t believe others matter in the same way you do. Either way, there are big problems with these beliefs:

One is that fearing we don’t matter can very quickly turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Imagine no one cares, and we generally will act – even subconsciously – to push others away. Imagine that we’re worthless and we will not have the confidence to do or accomplish anything, and our gifts will wither on the vine. Imagine we’re insignificant, and we can never be the people we were created to be – you can never be the person only you can be. If we don’t believe ourselves worthy of love, it’s very
difficult to experience it…. And if we believe others to be insignificant, that’s when we lose sight of who we are called to be in the world, and how we are called to share God’s love with absolutely everyone we meet, the way Jesus lived his life.

But the second problem with all this might be even worse: because believing anyone – including yourself – doesn’t matter, is unfaithful. Because it ignores the truth of creation, that you and I were created out of nothing by the God of all the universe, and even more, we were created in God’s image. In the likeness of God. God had already created every creature and every feature on the earth and could have had the whole place to Godself to enjoy in pristine beauty without us messing everything up with our greed and our weapons and our misunderstanding and our lack of foresight. But God created all those things, then said, “You know what, this is good, but it’s not enough.” And the first man and the first woman were crafted out of the dust of the earth and God’s own breath swept into their lungs, and you and I are a part of that which God called very good.

Now maybe most days we look around and say, “Okay, I can see a tiny bit of the image of God in that guy and a little bit in her, and I guess all together the whole “image of God” thing makes a wee bit of sense, but let’s get real on this “image of God:” we all know that somebody messed that up a long time ago.” And somebody did mess up, and all of us have kept messing up ever since then, but the image of God in which each of us was created cannot be erased. It’s still there, impressed upon every inch of our beings. We can’t escape it. And here’s what that means:

God made us with souls and minds and freedom and language, which shows that we were made for communion with God. We matter to God – each one of us. God knows us and calls us by name. God has plenty of huge issues to deal with in the world and is receiving millions of prayers every second, but God still knows the number of hairs on our heads – a completely irrelevant, unhelpful thing to know! God cares about us, deeply. God wants to be in relationship with all of us. We matter to God.

We also matter to the earth. If you read the creation story, you’ll see that people were made to be God’s vice-regents on the earth. We are stewards on behalf of God. We take care of the earth in service to God. Each of us has to participate in this, because each of us makes an impression on the earth one way or the other, no matter how small or large. We matter to creation. Creation is counting on each of us.

And we also matter to others – maybe sometimes you’ve thought this isn’t true in real practice, but I’m telling you it’s Gospel truth, whether we accept it right now or not. We were created as social beings – not one person in the garden, but two. And those two walked with God and had conversations – they didn’t build little huts so they could protect their privacy and stick to themselves. Our personhood is shaped by interaction with others – every day – every interaction shapes us, just like we are constantly formed and re-formed by our interaction and communion with God.

It can all be hard to see in the real world, but think about that – no one in this room could be as fully who they are now without you being here, too. And our understanding of God – all of us together – is made greater by each person’s individual understanding… which means we get closer to the truth of who God is and who we are called to be when each person plays their part. That means you matter not only to God and others and the earth, but specifically to the Church. And to this Church. The more different voices are at the table, the closer this place gets to the Kingdom. That includes your voice, the one God was intentional about giving to you.

In fact, if we believe that we are the body of Christ, the Church, and each of us members of it (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians), then you matter to others in the same way that your toe or your nose matters to your body. Any time you move, the whole body of Christ changes. Any time you give or take or step out or lean in, the whole body of Christ is affected. Just like when your toe is infected, the
whole body feels sick; or when your nose is stopped up, your whole body is weakened... when you move, it matters to the body of Christ. So we all matter to others, as well.

It seems so obvious, and yet we struggle so much with this concept – we are afraid that we don’t matter, that we aren’t good enough, that we are insignificant. And I think the media definitely fuels that fear – telling us that if we have the latest model of luxury car and the finest furniture and the new shoes and those special golf clubs and whatever else – then we will matter. But that’s a lie that marketing experts tell us to sell us some stuff we will never need. Other people tell us that when we get that promotion, then we will matter. When we reach that level of income, then we will matter. When we get in the “in crowd,” then we will matter. But that’s all something that insecure people tell us to make ourselves feel more powerful. None of that makes us matter. What makes us matter is God’s image stamped on our very souls, saying, “This one’s mine.” We don’t have to hustle for our worthiness or earn it somehow: we’re born with it. It’s innate. We just have to believe in it.

It’s significant that this passage about God knowing the hairs on our heads comes at the end of chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel, where we’ve just seen Jesus summon the disciples and give them authority over unclean spirits and the power to heal illnesses and even raise the dead. We learn the disciples’ names in this chapter, and we see that they are hardly a distinguished bunch – they’re just average working people, and people “of little faith” at that. But they are who Jesus has called. And they are the ones he asks to do what he has done – miracles, really. They will face persecution – that much is clear – but Jesus tells them not to be afraid of what people say, because they matter to God. They have been chosen.

And that’s just it: God makes regular people, and that’s who God chooses. God loves ordinary people and loves making ordinary people (and things) extraordinary, which is how every week we watch juice and bread turn into salvation and life. God knows us, each of us, even the hairs on our heads. We matter. Begin to believe it, and let all the stickers the world has given you – gold stars and gray dots alike – flutter to the ground.

Amen.

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler
Faith United Methodist Church – Issaquah/Sammamish, WA
February 21, 2016