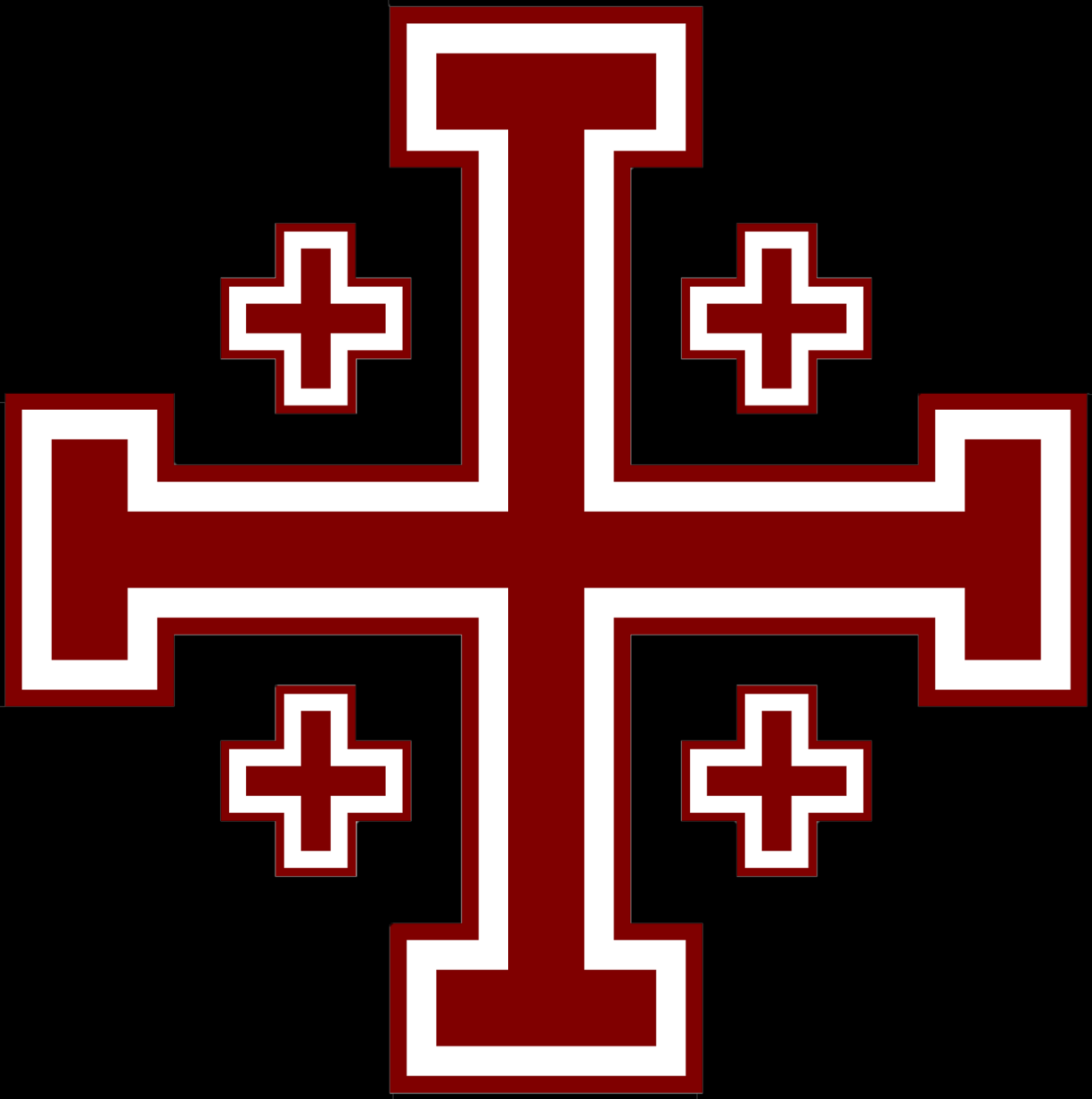


Come, Follow Me

Disciples Love and Care for Others



Sermon Series



Come, Follow Me:

Disciples Love and Care for Others

Introduction to the Sermon Series

This is the fourth installment in the preaching and study series "[Come, Follow Me](#)," a project of the [South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church](#).

"Come, Follow Me" began in an after-seminar conversation at Lake Junaluska that focused on one question: How do we help people move from thinking of themselves as church members to thinking of themselves as Christian disciples? Behind that concern was the recognition that those who think of themselves as members of any organization may or may not live fully committed to the organization's principles; for example, the Lions Club or other civic-service organization. One may pay dues and choose to attend or participate at will. On the other hand, disciples live as apprentices to the master. Christian disciples follow the teaching and life of Jesus.

Steve Harper identified five characteristics of a Methodist Christian:

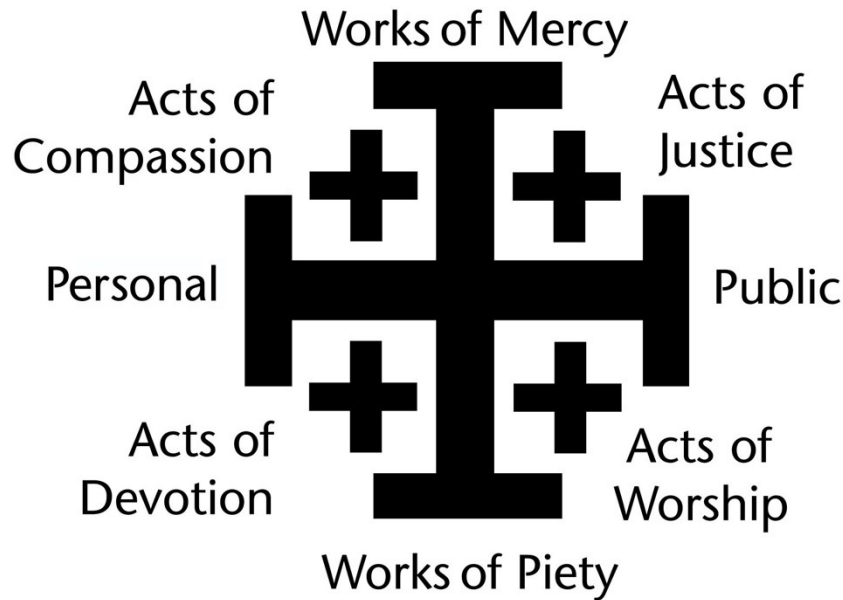
- A Methodist loves God.
- A Methodist rejoices in God.
- A Methodist gives thanks.
- A Methodist prays constantly.
- A Methodist loves others.¹

Harper notes that the love of God always points Christian disciples to the love of others and that this follows Jesus' affirmation of the greatest commandment: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

Earlier chapters of the "Come, Follow Me" series examined facets of the love of God and the spiritual growth of disciples. In this chapter, we focus on the command of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself." In response to a question of who that neighbor might be, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

The following image of the Jerusalem Cross also guides our conversation about the love of neighbor. The cross points to our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with neighbor.

¹ Steve Harper, [Five Marks of a Methodist: The Fruit of a Living Faith](#).



On this model, we see personal or individual actions (compassion, devotion) and corporate actions (justice, worship).

Works of mercy, acts of compassion, and acts of justice are part of our everyday life in Christ. These everyday actions of mercy and compassion incarnate our answer to the question of how we show love to our neighbor.

We envision this as a series of sermons for summer use in worship and with small groups. Each sermon stands alone. Each sermon should be understood as part of a school for Christian discipleship. The sequence begins with the call by Jesus to those who would follow him in biblical times and today, and then moves through some of the instructions of Jesus to his followers. It concludes with passages from Epistles that also deal with expectations of church and disciples.

Each Sunday lists two passages of scripture: a reading from one of the Hebrew prophets and either a Gospel or an Epistle passage. Both passages influenced our thinking about the development of each sermon. Please note that this sermon series does not offer a chronological sequence, but a way to begin thinking, preaching and teaching about how we love our neighbor as our commitment to Christian discipleship.

May our work together bear spiritual fruit.

For the working group,





The Rev. George Donigian



The Writing Team

- The Rev. **Jim Arant** is an ordained deacon who has worked with the South Carolina Conference since 1989. As a retired congregational specialist, he continues to work with congregations in the [Orangeburg](#) and [Greenwood](#) Districts. Rev. Arant also works with the Discipleship Ministry Area of Conference [Connectional Ministries](#) and has been the project manager for all four “Come, Follow Me” sermon series. He is married to the Rev. Ruth Arant, who is also an ordained deacon. They have two children and five grandchildren. 
- The Rev. **George Hovaness Donigian** is married to the Rev. Mary Teasley and is in his fourth chapter of ministry since graduating from the [Candler School of Theology](#) at Emory University. After serving as a pastor in the [Virginia Conference](#), he worked in denominational publishing before moving to South Carolina to serve pastoral appointments. In his work at [The Upper Room](#), he represented the denomination on several committees of the [National Council of Churches](#), consulted with French-speaking United Methodists and with [Africa Upper Room Ministries](#). Rev. Donigian is the author of several books and many articles and other materials. 
- The Rev. **Tim Drum** is the chaplain at [Spartanburg Methodist College](#), where he gets to see the fruit of the generosity of the churches of the South Carolina Conference in the lives of young people. He graduated from [Duke Divinity School](#) in 2007. He served as a pastor in Western North Carolina for 10 years before coming to Spartanburg Methodist. He also describes himself as an oddity: a United Methodist clergy member who pulls for the University of North Carolina and a NASCAR fan who also loves “Star Trek.” Tim is married to Kristen Drum, and they have a 5-year-old daughter named Harper. They swore they would never be the kind of parents who called each other “Mama” and “Daddy.” Tim further comments: “I guess that’s why you shouldn’t swear.” Tim also serves as the pastor of [Immanuel UMC](#) in Wellford, South Carolina. 
- The Rev. Dr. **Sheila Elliott Hodge** is a native of Columbia and is married to the Rev. Dr. Anthony Hodge, superintendent of the [Rock Hill District](#). Rev. Elliott Hodge is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference and is currently serving as the senior pastor of [Silver Hill Memorial UMC](#) in Spartanburg, South Carolina. She is a graduate of the [Candler School of Theology](#) at Emory University in Atlanta. Prior to pursuing her call to fulltime ordained ministry, Rev. Elliott Hodge was the first tenured African-American professor at [Columbia College](#). She earned her Ph.D. in International Relations Theory and Practice from the [University of South Carolina](#). Dr. Elliott Hodge is a 2010 [Riley Institute Diversity Fellow](#) (a program of [Furman University](#)), and endeavors to be continually engaged in issues of diversity, difference and child advocacy. She also serves as an adjunct professor at the [Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary](#) of Lenoir-Rhyne University in Columbia, where she teaches classes such as Social Justice Preaching, Preaching in the African-American Tradition, and Prophetic Preaching. Rev. Elliott Hodge is a member of the [Walk to Emmaus](#), and a graduate of the Mediation Skills Training Institute sponsored by the [Lombard Mennonite Peace Center](#). 



- The Rev. **Jon Hoin** is the senior pastor of [Platt Springs United Methodist Church](#) in West Columbia, South Carolina. At the end of college, he decided he should probably make an effort to do some good with his life, and he figured that a good place to do that would be in the church. So he went off to the [Candler School of Theology](#) at Emory University and, when he couldn't get enough theology, he went back to get second master's degree at the [Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary](#) of Lenoir-Rhyne University in Columbia. Jon is married to the Rev. Sara Relaford, who has very strong opinions about a variety of nerdy religious topics (re: Greek and Hebrew). Jon's other interests include Brazilian jiu-jitsu, kendo and kickboxing. Nature, hiking and canoeing also provide outlets for his wanderlust. His longtime passion for evolutionary biology causes him to over-analyze the behaviors of the family cats and dog. If you can't find him at the gym or in the woods, then he's probably playing some overly complicated board game in a poorly lit room or reading science, science fiction and fantasy literature. 
- Bishop **L. Jonathan Holston** serves as resident bishop of the [South Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church](#). He is married to Felecia Brown Holston, and they have two adult children, Karlton and Brittany. Bishop Holston earned his master of divinity degree in biblical studies from the [Interdenominational Theological Center](#) at Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta in 1983. He also holds a bachelor of arts in religion from the [University of Georgia](#). Bishop Holston possesses extraordinary knowledge gained through his leadership on numerous boards and committees of The United Methodist Church at both the conference and general church level. His love for missions has taken him around the world, and he is passionate about connecting with people, hearing their stories, and empowering them to make a positive difference in the world for the sake of Christ. 
- The Rev. **Kitty Holtzclaw**, an elder in the South Carolina Conference, lists in her biography disciple of Jesus, lead pastor at [St. John's United Methodist Church](#) in Anderson, South Carolina, football coach's wife, and mother of an adult son in graduate school. She loves music, horseback riding, the North Carolina High Country, and learning new things. Rev. Holtzclaw has a heart for animals and all God's creatures who cannot speak for themselves. 
- The Rev. **Cameron Levi** is a provisional elder in the South Carolina Conference, currently appointed as the pastor of [St. Paul United Methodist Church](#) in Saluda, South Carolina. Rev. Levi graduated with the master of divinity degree from the [Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary](#) of Lenoir-Rhyne University in Columbia. He is married to Sabrina Lercara Levi, and together they have two dogs, Goldie and Tuna, and two cats, Boo and Maru. 



- The Rev. **Edward Stallworth** is the pastor of [Pelion United Methodist Church](#) and Sharon United Methodist Church, both in Pelion, South Carolina. He was raised in Denver, Colorado, as a Nichiren Buddhist. His multicultural background offers a unique perspective and insight about faith and life. He is married to Jennifer Stallworth, a genetic counselor. They have two young children, Vivian and Edward IV (Ned). Ed enjoys hiking, biking and cooking.
- The Rev. **Mary Teasley** is an elder in the South Carolina Conference and has served in a variety of ministry settings over the past 40 years. She is currently lead pastor of [Surfside United Methodist Church](#) in Surfside Beach, South Carolina. Rev. Teasley is married to the Rev. George Donigian, and together they have six adult children plus their spouses, nine grandchildren, and one Pomeranian.



Further Reading

- "[A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living](#)," by Kevin M. Watson.
- "[Five Marks of a Methodist: The Fruit of a Living Faith](#)," by Steve Harper.
- "[Living Our Beliefs: The United Methodist Way](#)," by Kenneth L. Carder.
- "[Mainline or Methodist? Rediscovering Our Evangelistic Mission](#)," by Scott Kisker.
- "[Not Just a One-Night Stand: Ministry with the Homeless](#)," by John Flowers and Karen Vannoy.
- "[Three Prayers You'll Want to Pray](#)," by George H. Donigian.
- The [United Methodist Social Principles](#).
- "[The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal](#)," edited by Paul W. Chilcote.



Sermon 1: Called a Disciple

Writer: Rev. Mary V. Teasley

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1 | Mark 1:16-28

Note to the Pastor

The series begins with an invitation by Jesus to follow. While Jesus does not give any details about what this will entail, he will show them very quickly that this is a task that is not just about them. The rest of the sermons in this series will allow us to look through a series of lenses that reveal how discipleship calls us to engage with others and to bring the Kingdom of God to bear in the world around us.

When Simon and Andrew, James and John dropped their nets and followed Jesus, they weren't given any indication of what that meant. There was no job description, no contract to sign. Just "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." The next three years will be an opportunity for them to discover through Jesus' words and actions what that meant.

The same is true for us. When we first say "yes" to Jesus' invitation to follow in the way of discipleship, we do not know where Jesus will lead us. We might think we do, but our initial hunches rarely prepare us for the reality ahead. In fact, that initial invitation is usually the first in a series of invitations that Jesus will offer us over the course of our lives, and that initial "yes" is usually the first of many. Jesus' invitation is an ongoing series of leading us to our next faithful steps in our faith journeys.

In Isaiah 61:1 we read, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." We read this with an understanding that the Anointed One of whom the prophet speaks is Jesus, and Jesus himself shares these words at the beginning of his ministry as recorded in Luke's gospel (Luke 4:16-20) to announce that, even now, these words are being fulfilled. The invitation to follow Jesus is an invitation to partner with him in this mission.

After calling the fishermen to come and follow, Jesus enters the synagogue, where he begins to show us what those words from Isaiah look like. We are called to live a cross-shaped life, rooted in the love of God as the vertical piece, and in the love of others as the horizontal piece. The arms of that horizontal piece could be described as acts of mercy and act of justice, fulfilling Jesus' understanding of the greatest of all the commandments.

But the disciples don't know this yet. So we begin at the beginning with them, as we say "yes" to exploring together what the call to care for others as disciples means over the next seven weeks.

Exegesis: Mark 1:16-28

Our text begins at the beginning of Mark's gospel and at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Mark does not give us any birth narratives, no glimpse into Jesus' life as a boy. Here Jesus shows up on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, ready to go to work. We get a hint of what has gone on prior to this moment, how he was baptized by John and driven by the spirit into the wilderness, but there are no details provided.



We simply find Jesus here, without fanfare or introduction, beginning the work that he came to do. And in typical Markan fashion, everything happens very quickly. Mark's use of the word "immediately" twice in the first four verses tells us that Jesus is on a mission and there is little time to waste. In Mark's gospel, every detail has meaning and serves to further emphasize the nature of Jesus' work in the world on behalf of others.

Jesus' first act is to call Simon, Andrew, James and John to follow him. The place and people are named with specificity, drawing us into the action. Jesus is clear about who he is and what he expects of those who would follow him, although that is not immediately clear. It will be in the following and teaching that the disciples will discover Jesus' intention. "Jesus himself is the best example of what he calls these disciples to do...He casts his word; they are caught up into the Kingdom of God. He calls them in turn to become fishermen at a deeper level. After his death and resurrection, they will spread the good news about Jesus and others will be caught up into the Kingdom of God."²

From there they go to Capernaum, and Jesus begins to teach on the Sabbath. There are two issues at work here: the issue of Jesus' authority and the act of healing. For Mark, these are central issues that will continue to play out throughout his gospel.

The contrast is established between the legal authorities of the day and the inherent authority in the person of Jesus. The authority of the teachers of the law rested in their power to interpret the existing laws and apply them to the lives of those under their jurisdiction. These laws sometimes were interpreted in ways that would oppress or control. Jesus' authority rested in his power as the Holy One, recognized by the demon in the synagogue before anyone else.

This healing was not simply to free this one man from a condition that was physically and culturally limiting. "Jesus came with power and authority greater than the forces that had corrupted and defaced human lives. For God to become King meant that all other forces had to be dethroned. And the most obvious sign of that was that the dark, shadowy forces that had seized control of some benighted individuals were being decisively challenged."³

Jesus has set the stage for everything that will come next. "Careful readers of Mark's gospel are put on notice from Chapter 1 that the boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, law-transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus, and he expects of his followers far more than 'amazement.'"⁴

The Sermon Outline

I. Introduction to the sermon series

A. Talk about the nature of invitations – some are formal, some are informal. The sermon series both highlights the call to discipleship and invites participants to follow this seven-week journey exploring the call to live as disciples who care for others.

B. Talk about discipleship using our United Methodist mission statement: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. A disciple is one who follows Jesus so that something

² Lamar Williamson Jr., [*Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*](#).

³ N. T. Wright, [*Lent for Everyone: Mark, Year B: A Daily Devotional*](#).

⁴ Gary W. Charles, [*Exegesis: Mark 1:21-28, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*](#).



will happen. For the purpose of this series, it is so that the lives of others will be touched by the love, grace, justice, mercy and power of the risen Christ, enabling them to live out lives of love and service to others. Disciples are called to act on behalf of Christ in the world.

C. Talk about your own call to discipleship.

II. Read the text

A. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and James and John by the Sea of Galilee where they were engaged in their daily tasks as fishermen. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." From the beginning, Jesus makes it clear that following involves being in community, that there is work to be done, and that there is no time to waste.

B. Jesus goes to Capernaum, where he begins teaching in the synagogue, and it is clear that he speaks with authority. His words carry power and compel his hearers to take notice.

C. A man with an unclean spirit cries out, and Jesus calls the spirit out. The man is healed. The incarnation means that God loved us enough to become embodied, honoring and redeeming the human body as well as the spirit. Jesus cares for the spiritual, relational and physical ramifications of the force of evil holding power over this one's life.

III. Answering the call to follow Jesus means that we will participate with compassion in acts of mercy and justice that care for our neighbors as whole persons.

A. Practicing discipleship calls us from theory to concrete acts of service.

B. John Wesley affirmed that there is no personal holiness apart from social holiness.

C. Our baptismal vows call us into the work of rejecting the evil powers of this world and resisting evil and injustice.

D. Our communion liturgy compels us to live as the Body of Christ in the world, to continue the work begun in him.

IV. Conclusion

As a response to the Word, extend the invitation to say "yes" to Jesus' call to follow, either for the first time, or to a deeper relationship in discipleship.

The Sermon: "Called a Disciple"

I do love an invitation. There are those invitations that come in the mail, in oversized envelopes with yet another envelope inside. "You are cordially invited," we read. "The honor of your presence is requested," it states. We know that there is a special occasion at hand...a wedding, or a graduation, or a retirement party. We check our calendars and note the date and time. We begin to make travel arrangements, maybe even shop for a new outfit for the occasion. We have time to plan and prepare.

Other invitations are more spontaneous. "Let's grab a cup of coffee." "Are you free for lunch?" "When can we get together?" Invitations such as these call for a shorter response time, but can transform an ordinary day into something special, perhaps even memorable.



And then there is the invitation of Jesus. Or at least the Jesus we encounter in Mark's gospel. Mark doesn't give us time to check our watches, much less our calendars. Jesus steps out of the wilderness and onto the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He sees Simon and his brother Andrew and says, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." It feels more like a summons, and in a way, it is.

The invitation to discipleship is a compelling invitation. Today, we are beginning a sermon series that is an invitation to follow Jesus. Over the next seven weeks, we will explore how this invitation is a call to care for others. There are, of course, other dimensions to a life of discipleship, but we will be looking through this particular lens for now.

Our United Methodist mission statement makes this clear. We are called "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." A disciple is one who follows Jesus so that something will happen. As we will discover through the teaching and example of Jesus, it is "so that" the lives of others will be touched by the love, grace, mercy, justice and power of the risen Christ, enabling them to live out lives of love and service to others. We are called to act on behalf of Christ in the world that God so loves.

Read aloud Mark 1:16-28.

We don't know anything about Simon and Andrew and James and John other than their names and the fact that they were fishermen. We don't know if they loved fishing or had grown tired of it. We don't know about family commitments or what they might have been interested in when they weren't tending to the chores that fishing demanded. All we know is that at Jesus' invitation to come and fish for people, they dropped everything and followed. "Immediately," Mark tells us. From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus makes it clear that there is work to be done, and that there is no time to waste.

Jesus also makes it clear that this call is not about me. It is about others. "I will make you fish for people." Over the course of the next three years, these disciples will learn from Jesus. They will watch and listen. They will take two steps forward and one step back. Their faith will grow, and it will falter. They will stand with Jesus, and they will flee. But today, they drop everything and follow.

Over the past 40-something years, I have been asked to share my "call story." For clergy going through the process for ordination, that typically means, "Tell us why you think you have been called to the vocation of ministry." And my story has usually included the broad strokes of teachers and pastors, family and friends who have influenced and shaped my life in ways that helped me hear God's call to spend my life in service through the Church.

But I have come to realize that my focus has been much too narrow.

My call, first and foremost, is to follow Jesus as a disciple. No matter what our vocational calling, we are first called to be disciples. "You fish for a living? I'll teach you how to do that with people in a way that gathers them in to a relationship with me," says Jesus. "You teach? You practice law? You're a nurse? You work on HVAC systems? You care for your family? It's been years since you could find meaningful work to do? You're 'just' a student? Come, follow me, and I'll show you how to do it in ways that will make this world look a little bit more like the Kingdom of Heaven." Who can resist an invitation like that?



I said “yes” to my first invitation to follow Jesus when I was confirmed at Francis Asbury Methodist Church in Greenville, South Carolina. Six months after I was born, my parents had said “yes” for me at the baptismal font at St. John’s Methodist Church in Anderson, South Carolina, but now it was my turn. I remember that our confirmation class met on Saturday mornings, and we learned things like The Apostles’ Creed and The Lord’s Prayer, and on a sunny Sunday morning I joined the church. I don’t remember much about learning to be a disciple, but I knew that now I was a member. And through that wonderful doctrine of sanctification, of growing in faith and understanding, I’m finally beginning to get it. Mostly, it’s like those first disciples who took two steps forward and one back, but I’m getting there. Going on to perfection.

Like those early disciples, most of us don’t fully understand what saying “yes” to Jesus means when we do it. I have found that I say “yes” over and over again to Jesus as he asks me, invites me, to take another faithful step in this journey of life and faith. And then another step, and another. Like those fishermen who dropped their nets by the Sea of Galilee and found themselves empowered by the Holy Spirit to fish for people in languages they had never learned.

Mark moves us immediately from the Sea of Galilee to the synagogue in Capernaum, and Jesus begins to teach these new followers what being a disciple who cares for others looks like. As Jesus is teaching, a man with an unclean spirit cries out. It is called “unclean” because the effect of this condition was to separate people from God. This spirit recognizes the authority of Jesus and knows that it has no power to oppress or deny the humanity of this one who is seeking God.

Jesus calls out the demon. He recognizes it for who it is and what it does. Those who are designated as “unclean” or “demon-possessed” are cut off from the community. They are denied any sort of aid or assistance. Jesus is not only calling out the demonic presence, Jesus is making it clear that he has come to care for the physical, mental, emotional and relational aspects of human life. No longer is being “religious” simply about following the law, it is also about a deep spirituality that encompasses all of life. The evil forces of the world that would imprison and hold power over God’s creation have been put on notice. Everyone present sits up and takes notice. Something new is beginning.

“What is this?” they ask. “A new teaching – with authority!” Their surprise comes from the fact that this authority is not just of position but also of power. Jesus’ very presence opens new possibilities for understanding what the Kingdom of God is about. Surely as the disciples witness this interaction, it begins to dawn on them that fishing for people is going to mean all people, gathering them into the nets of this new thing that is unfolding before their very eyes. They have just been given a glimpse into the very heart of God, whose love and compassion is for all people, and whose care is made manifest in concrete, life-changing ways.

I recently purchased the book “Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World,” by Kathy Escobar. I soon realized that it would be more than a quick read. Each chapter calls for self-reflection and opportunities to practice a number of areas of discipleship: healing, listening, loving, including, advocating, to name a few. In the introduction, the author recognizes our “desire to live out our faith in a tangible way,” to “cultivate a more practical faith and a less theoretical one.” “The core of our life together is relationship and practice,” she says.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, affirmed that there is no personal holiness apart from social holiness. “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social



holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.”⁵

These words touch a longing and hunger deep within me. They speak to the call of Jesus to a life of discipleship, a life lived by the power of the Spirit to bring hope and help into being in this world that God so loves. While many organizations have volunteers, churches have disciples. As disciples, our calling is to live for Christ in the world.

Our sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion make this clear. Our baptismal and confirmation vows, where this journey of discipleship begins, affirm our commitment to “renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of (our) sin,” and to “resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” (UMH, p. 34) And in the ongoing sacrament of Holy Communion we pray, “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and the blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.” (UMH, p. 14)

The invitation to follow Jesus is an open invitation. It is an invitation that is addressed to each of us. “Come, follow me.” You may be considering this invitation today for the first time. You may have said “yes” many years ago. Always, Jesus comes close and invites us into a deeper relationship with him, and into a way of life that will make a difference in the world around us. I want to be part of something like that. I want to give my life to something like that.

I hope you do, too.

Other Illustrations

- “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those (men) who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.”⁶
- “The wisdom of the Desert Fathers includes the wisdom that the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self – to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”⁷
- You may want to offer “[The Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant](#)” (UMH, pp. 50-53) as a response to the Word as a way of setting the tone for the sermon series.
- You may wish to use “[The World Methodist Social Affirmation](#)” (UMH 886) during worship or as part of a study.

⁵ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*.



- Consider engaging the congregation in an outreach mission emphasis as part of this sermon/study series. It may be through acts of mercy such as collecting food for a food pantry or serving in a feeding program, or through acts of justice such as exploring the issues of food insecurity in your community and becoming an advocate for public policies that address hunger and poverty.

Supplemental Resources

- If you use the Schweitzer quote cited above, you may want to sing the hymn "[He Comes to Us as One Unknown](#)," published by The [General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church](#), written by F. Richard Garland in 2011, and sung to the tune Brother James' Air.
- Traditional hymns:
 - "[Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit](#)" (UMH 264)
 - "[God of Love and God of Power](#)" (UMH 578)
 - "[Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service](#)" (UMH 581)
 - "[Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore](#)" (UMH 344)
- Contemporary songs:
 - "[If We Are the Body](#)," by Casting Crowns.
 - "[I Will Follow](#)," by Chris Tomlin.
 - "[My Lighthouse](#)," by Rend Collective.

Further Reading

- "[Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1](#)," edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, pp. 285-289, 308-313.
- "[Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World](#)," by Kathy Escobar.
- "[An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith](#)," by Barbara Brown Taylor.
- "[Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching](#)," by Lamar Williamson Jr.
- "[How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels](#)," by N.T. Wright.
- "[Lent for Everyone: Mark, Year B: A Daily Devotional](#)," by N.T. Wright.



Sermon 2: New Thinking

Writer: Rev. Kitty Holtzclaw

Scripture: Isaiah 54:2-4 | Matthew 5:38-42

Note to the Pastor

This gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount gives the preacher flexibility to address specific needs of the community of listeners. It would preach differently to a wealthy congregation who wield power in their local communities than to a congregation of lesser means, differently to a domestic abuse shelter or military personnel than a “typical” congregation. Is Jesus asking them to give up their honor when they already had so little? To lower themselves even further? That is in the realm of possibilities because Jesus calls his disciples to a life of service, including dying to self.

There are individuals and communities that need a stern reminder that discipleship is a life of service in the Kingdom of God. While worshippers may be more inclined to identify with disciples, are there places in the listener’s life where they are the ones inflicting pain or humiliation? Jesus is a fierce defender of the vulnerable and oppressed; he often lifted up those that others dishonored. Are there situations where parishioners can step in and help someone who cannot help themselves? In all cases, Jesus calls for an intentional response that reflects ethics of God’s Kingdom.

While the “You have heard...but I say” statements are shocking and demanding, they are also empowering. Rather than being victims or being trapped by the rules of culture, disciples become agents of change and create hopeful possibilities for transformation in their future and the future of the world. In the Greatest Commandment, Jesus says that we must love God with all that we are (heart, soul, mind and strength). It takes all of our being to love because our thoughts, hearts and actions cannot completely be separated, and each plays a role in making us who we are.

Future sermons in the series will address themes such as forgiveness, love and the way we treat others. This sermon focuses on how our new ways of thinking bring new understanding of our situations and power to change our hearts and actions to create a different future and a different world.

We spend countless hours planning, organizing and making decisions about ordinary things. We design and improve and upgrade tools we believe will make our lives better. Should we do any less for our present and future realities? Jesus calls us to “rewrite the script” on our present and future relationships in light of his good news. One approach with this sermon could be to take any number of news clips, political slogans, mottos or Tweets and consider how Jesus would give a new understanding of “You have heard it said...but I say to you...”

While this sermon’s main focus is on the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, Isaiah 54 provides the preacher with a wonderful opportunity to invite the listener to think expansively with Isaiah’s use of the tent imagery. What could “enlarging the site of your tent” mean in the life of today’s disciple? What cords need to be lengthened? Which stakes need strengthening? The passage acknowledges the concerns involved in opening up to new possibilities and describes how life will be fuller and richer when the risks are taken.



Exegesis: 5:38-42

Each gospel has its own personality and emphases. Matthew's version of the gospel begins with a list of Jesus' ancestors, beginning with 14 generations from the time of Abraham to King David, 14 generations from the time of King David to the exile in Babylon, and 14 more generations from the exile to the birth of the Promised Messiah. Matthew highlights many Jewish features on Jesus' ministry, in part, to show the relationship of Jesus to Judaism rather than promote the idea that Jesus created an entirely new "religion," and also to show that even though God's people had experienced good times and harsh times throughout history, God's promises were still in effect and Jesus is the Savior. Matthew shows that Jesus is the clearest revelation of God and he is different from the prophets. While Jesus affirms the prophets as God's messengers, Matthew makes clear that Jesus is God incarnate.

By the time Matthew was written, Jerusalem had been attacked and the temple destroyed. The early Christians are facing persecution and must be wondering if they are wrong or foolish to follow Christ. Matthew encourages them with Jesus' words that his followers aren't exempt from suffering, but their suffering is not in vain. Much of Jesus' teachings are about how the Kingdom of Heaven is different from the kingdom of Rome. Their suffering does not mean that they have been abandoned. They can find and make meaning even during times of oppression.

Matthew relates that after Jesus has been baptized, tempted and then called his first disciples, Jesus began teaching and healing. Large crowds followed him from all across the region. In Matthew 5, Jesus sees the crowds and goes up the mountain. Like other traditional rabbis, Jesus sits down to teach, and his disciples gather around him and he begins teaching them in what would come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus reinterprets familiar laws from the Hebrew scriptures and includes a new one. He begins with the Beatitudes that focus on the ethics of the Kingdom of Heaven. They are shocking statements that seem counter to their daily experiences of reality. He calls a surprising group of people blessed (happy or fortunate), including the poor in spirit, the grieving, the ones who are yearning to be right with God, and even those being persecuted because of him. In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus says he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it, and his followers must be even more righteous than the experts who know the law best. That is the only way they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

After these general statements, beginning in Matthew 5:21, Jesus reinterprets ancient laws with the phrase, "You have heard it said, . . . But I say to you . . ." Drawing from Hebrew scripture (Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, Deuteronomy 19) and the Lex Talionis (law of retribution) of Hammurabi,⁸ Jesus addresses anger, adultery, divorce, making oaths and love for enemies. The focus verses of the sermon (vs.38-42) address retaliation. Retribution literally means "pay back," and retributive justice is often associated with "an eye for an eye." While closely related, retaliation in this case is on a personal level. John J. Pilch provides some interesting cultural insights on Jesus' instructions in these verses:⁹

⁸ Evan Andrews, "[8 Things You May Not Know About Hammurabi's Code](#)".

⁹ John J. Pilch, [The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A](#).



- Verse 39: Being struck on the right cheek requires a strike using the left hand. The left hand was reserved for bodily functions that were considered “unclean;” therefore, being struck by the left hand was especially offensive.
- Verse 40: To rely on a court to settle a dispute was considered a disgrace. Ancient Palestinians had very few possessions. The cloak (NRSV) was absolutely essential as both a piece of clothing and a sleeping bag. To give this up will leave the individual vulnerable and naked, an extremely shameful condition in their day and age.
- Verse 41: It was both legal and customary for soldiers to force ordinary citizens to carry their military gear for a specified distance, usually translated in English as a “mile.” In first-century Palestine, this soldier was frequently a fellow Israelite who turned mercenary. Carrying gear was humiliating enough. It was even more humiliating to do this for a traitor.

Since individual material possessions were so scarce in ancient Israel, an individual’s honor was a precious commodity. When threatened with dishonor, they will attempt to protect and defend it. While retribution may be enforced by a higher authority such as a legal system, retaliation is enacted by the individual. Rather than resisting the aggressor, Jesus charges the disciple with resisting the hostility and contempt and being actively creative in ways that break the endless cycle of violence and making enemies. While Jesus does address the ethics and practices of higher authorities, Matthew 5:38-42 specifically addresses how individuals can enact the Kingdom of Heaven ethics in their personal lives.

Parallel verses are found in Luke 6:29-30.

Sermon Outline

1. Codes are an essential part of our lives.
 - a. While we tend to think of them in very practical ways, they also help us navigate our daily lives.
 - b. From the earliest days, God’s people were called to live by a different “code.”
 - c. God’s people are “holy” or set apart for sacred purposes
2. Holiness Code
 - a. guided the Israelites in making sense and giving meaning to their lives
 - b. built the framework for the story of how God’s people live together with God, one another
 - c. taught them how to relate to people different from them
3. Jesus reinterprets the Holiness Code according to Kingdom of Heaven ethics.
 - a. Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”
 - b. “You have heard it said, . . . But I say . . .” statements on anger, adultery, divorce, integrity in our speech, retaliation and loving one’s neighbor



- c. Jesus gives his followers a way to have personal autonomy and make meaning apart from existing cultural codes and to create a new future and world.

4. Futures Literacy

- a. Probable Future versus Preferred Future
- b. Loes Damhof: "Some people are colonizing our futures. They are setting the parameters today for the probable world we live in tomorrow. We don't have to let them. We can imagine a preferred future and act to create it."
- c. "If it can't be happy, make it beautiful." – Samuel Wells
- d. Even when we don't have the power to change our circumstances, we can still make meaning in them.

The Sermon: "New Thinking"

Our lives are guided by codes. Computer codes allow the operator into a computer network and prove a way to navigate in the system. Passcodes give you entry into buildings, but the alarm goes off if you try to enter without having been given access. Bank accounts lock down if we try to enter the wrong passcode too many times. Dress codes tell us the "right" thing to wear so we fit in. (Churches are the worst about that! Tell me what I'm "supposed" to wear to church, and I know exactly which cookie cutter I'll be cut from that day.)

Our families, friends, schools and workplaces all have codes of conduct that teach us, "That's the way we do it around here." Communities, states and nations have spoken and unspoken rules of "do it this way" and "don't do it that way" to keep the system from descending into chaos. From the cradle to the grave, we are molded by codes we live by and their expectations of us.

Codes vary from culture to culture and from time to time. They can be compared to the words that write our personal and community stories. In some ways, they create our worlds. While codes usually revolve around life together, they are very personal and become part of who we are as individuals. Some of our codes are so much a part of us that they are like oxygen. We walk around saturated in them every day. We need them to continue functioning, but we've gotten so used to them that we aren't aware of them until they are breached.

Problems occur when what I think is going on and my dreams for the world bump up against what you think is going on and your dreams for the world. Someone recently told me, "I'm from up North, and we don't do it like that up there." He said he would always "be a northerner," which I took to mean he would always think and act like a northerner. I immediately thought, "That explains a lot. Be who you are. But you're living in the South." He had no desire to adapt to the "code" of the South, and he has been bumping up against it ever since.

From the earliest of times, God's people were to be different from surrounding cultures. They were to have a different meaning and a different story. The word "holy" means "set apart," or consecrated for God's purposes. Several times in the book of Leviticus, the Lord speaks to Moses, telling the people, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Leviticus Chapters 17-26 contains a collection of regulations often called The Holiness Code. This Holiness Code describes ways the Israelites are



supposed to be set apart or separated from the rest of the world because YHWH (God) has chosen them. They are to demonstrate their election by removing themselves from sinful behaviors and by keeping ritual and moral purity. The Holiness Code includes rules for eating, cleanliness, priestly conduct, animal sacrifices, speech, sexual regulations, economic practices, and further includes a list of holy days and how they are to be observed.

The social focus of the Holiness Code is striking: relationships with family, the poor, fair wages, slander, sexual exploitation, neighborly responsibility and proper land management, as well as the more symbolic and ceremonial aspects of holiness. The key statement of purpose is found in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." In short, The Holiness Code made sense and gave meaning to their lives, while it built the framework for how God's people live together with God and one another, as well as how they relate to people different from them.

Over the centuries, the Israelites used the law to determine their righteousness. At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman government had taken over Israel and ruled the land by force. This was no Israelite's dream for themselves, their families or their world. They were being oppressed by the more powerful Romans and by other Israelites who were betraying their own people. Violent and powerful people took advantage of people with less power.

Jesus grew up knowing the difficulty of living The Holiness Code in this challenging time in Israel's history. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17), he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." He went on to say that his disciples' righteousness needed to exceed even those who knew the law best or they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. This was both good news and bad news for the people listening to Jesus' sermon. He wasn't doing away with their old ways. What a relief! However, they were going to have to begin to think differently if they were going to be his followers. Then he begins reinterpreting the law given on Mount Sinai.

Jesus takes six of the laws that limit addressing anger, adultery, divorce, the integrity of being true to our word, retaliation, and loving one's enemies. Each time he repeats the phrase, "You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say . . ." He was changing their way of thinking, and the things he said were hard to hear. Life was already hard; living it as holy people may have even been harder in the oppressive conditions. Was Jesus now asking the impossible?

At first glance, it sounds like Jesus is turning his followers into the world's doormat. When the bully comes to take our lunch, are we automatically supposed to offer our snack money, too? That just leaves us hungry and abused victims. Is that the life he wants for his disciples? Absolutely not. Jesus came to give us abundant life. So, he must be up to something here.

Certainly, anyone who had been given a black eye or punched in the jaw could see themselves as a victim. In the ancient world, a Roman soldier could force any Israelite to stop whatever he was doing and carry the soldier's equipment for approximately one mile, but no farther. The Gospels tell about how a Roman soldier forced Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross to Golgotha because Jesus was too weak and injured to do it himself. Anyone whose day had been interrupted for the benefit of an enemy army would be complaining that night at the dinner table about the unfairness of it all when somebody else is calling all the shots.



Much like a martial artist, Jesus uses the opponent's momentum to generate energy for his desired outcome. Rather than making his disciples into victims, Jesus brings them out of the powerless victim role and offers them power to make a different meaning and personal autonomy using experiences they encounter in their daily lives. He is challenging them to look at real life situations and to realize that there are other options. They don't have to follow the current "code." Jesus is recalibrating the way they think about the situation, so they can feel differently and act differently, so the situation can be brought into the light of Christ and be redeemed as entry into God's kingdom. A disciple might not like what they have to do, but they aren't victims without voice. They can take the momentum of a situation and write a different end to the story. Jesus is giving them some say-so in the matter and redeems it with a degree of holiness.

Loes Damhof is a professor at Hanze University in The Netherlands, where she specializes in "futures literacy."¹⁰ Notice that "futures" is plural because we all have a probable future based on our current ways of living but our probable future may not be the same as our preferred future. Damhof encourages people to think about the space between the probable future and preferred future and consider possibilities they hadn't thought about before. Damhof said, "Some people are colonizing our futures. They are setting the parameters today for the probable world we live in tomorrow. We don't have to let them. We can imagine a different preferred future and act to create it. The future is not determined." She believes the one thing that is holding us back is the poverty of our imagination. While I don't know Damhof's religious beliefs, I do know she sounds like a prophet. Whether she is a follower or not, she sounds like Jesus.

Our world, our communities and our homes are experiencing a unique era in which our most basic values are being re-examined – and challenged – and we are becoming aware of how precious our healthy, strong relationships are. However, this time is also drawing back the curtain on how frail many of our other relationships are. Many people worry about what the future holds. Jesus teaches his disciples that we have power in how we understand our situations and how we co-create the future.

Jesus is also teaching his disciples that when our circumstances don't make sense, we can still make meaning in them. Samuel Wells suggested a heartbroken family move up the wedding date when the dying father found out he would not live long enough to walk his daughter down the aisle. That following Saturday, he joined her at the front pew and walked beside her the last half-dozen steps. Wells says that, as the father offered her hand to the groom, he sensed the words of Simeon: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace." After the service, Wells remembered a conversation 10 years earlier when he was asked what he would like written on his tombstone. Wells said he didn't know where the thought came from, but it landed fully formed: "If it can't be happy, make it beautiful." This wedding story doesn't have a traditional "happily ever after." The father of the bride died four days later. But, Wells said, "We'd all done something beautiful together, and when we gathered for his funeral, the beauty of one blended into the beauty of the other. It was good. It was true."¹¹

There are many things in this world that don't "make sense." We don't have the power to make every circumstance "good" or "pretty" or "right," but we can lace it with beauty. We can use wisdom and

¹⁰ "[Loes Damhof: If there ever was a time to learn from the future, it is now](#)," YouTube, March 5, 2021.

¹¹ Samuel Wells, "Faith Matters: Make it Beautiful", *The Christian Century*, December 16, 2020.



grace to give it a different meaning or create meaning when there is none. We don't have to participate in the current codes of anger and violence. Jesus points out the poverty of our imagination and leads us to explore a new future with holy curiosity. We can write a different story. With Christ, we can be residents of a different kingdom – the Kingdom of God. Christ invites us to join with him in co-creating a different world where we are at peace with him, at peace with ourselves, and at peace with the world.

Jesus says, "You have heard it said, . . . but I say . . ."

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Thanks be to God.

Other Illustrations

- The book of Proverbs points out that a soft answer turns away wrath. To have the Christ-follower respond in the surprising way Jesus speaks about changes the entire encounter and potentially the relationship. Maybe the offenders even asked, "What is it about these Christ-followers? How can they live in these circumstances and still keep a sense of dignity in these circumstances? How can they think the way they do?"
- Our actions, our feelings and our thoughts are intertwined, and all of them influence the other aspects. When God spoke through Isaiah, saying, "enlarge the site of your tent," it meant that God's people needed to think in new and bigger ways. Generations later, the Apostle Paul would write to Christians in Rome saying, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

While most days, our codes help us get along smoothly, we have times when our way of living life is challenged. I was excited about second grade – as much as any 7-year-old can be excited about the end of summer – but I also remember the anxiety because of what I had overheard about upcoming racial desegregation in public schools on the evening news and in the hushed voices of worried adults. On the first day of second grade, I was delighted to find myself seated in one of the six desks right beside the teacher's desk on the back row of the classroom. Everyone seemed to be in the classroom even though there were two empty seats on our row – an empty seat between me and another White girl and an empty seat between two White boys. I vividly remember the moment two shy Black second-graders were escorted into the



classroom. The Black girl was seated between me and another white girl while the Black boy was seated between two White boys on the other end of the back row.

She hardly looked up that first day and neither did I, but we cast sideways glances at one another and began to warm toward one another. I learned that her name was Deborah. We both liked the same games at recess, our favorite subject was reading, were members of the same church denomination, had the same favorite color, which happened to be two colors – red and blue because we couldn't decide. Over time, I learned that she and I were more alike than I possibly could have imagined. Isaiah 54:2 reads, "Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out." I could not have known it at the time, but that was a moment when my tent was enlarged, and new ways of thinking began to emerge.

- John Wesley's emphasis on the social nature of holiness is one of his key insights. In the preface to "Hymns and Sacred Poems," Wesley wrote, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social, no holiness but social holiness. 'Faith working by love' is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection."¹²

Followers of Jesus live by a different social code from either of those ways of living with others – the Kingdom of God framework. He engages us to see our own personal worth as we share Christ's sacrificial love with others.

When asked about these passages in the Sermon on the Mount, we may be tempted to try to soften them. After all, who lives like this? How could we? We don't want to come across as hypocrites. Maybe God just wants us to try really hard and do our best. God can't really expect holiness and perfection! How could one realistically impose those kinds of standards on children they love?

The reason we should do this is to emulate God's character. Scripture says God "allows rain to fall on the just and the unjust." God's followers treat others (good or evil) with consistent love. As difficult as this is, Jesus is telling us that we must determine our own actions rather than allowing others to define us. We decide how we will respond rather than their actions' determining how we will respond. "He made me do it" is never the correct answer to "Why did you do that?" Jesus calls us to a higher way than our natural inclination. He does not do away with the law, nor does he make Scripture easier to swallow. He simply casts off literal-legalistic interpretation, which frees us to reach those things that make no sense in a new light, the light of God's wisdom, however foolish it may appear.

- We were recently watching women's gymnastics on television and were amazed at how high one of the gymnasts tumbled through the air. It didn't seem possible. How fast or high or far can we go? What are the limits of human potential? Perhaps the Levitical commandment to be holy and Jesus' commandment to be perfect are opportunities to practice spiritual disciplines that will draw us closer to the heart of what God wants of the world and expects from us. Maybe we need to practice holiness and perfection in order to achieve them. In the end, we may never be holy or perfect, but are any of us bold enough to give it a shot?

¹² William H. Willimon, Joel B. Green, et al, editors, [Wesley Study Bible](#).



- “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was not given as a prescription that must be administered but as permission for proportional rather than excessive retaliation. For example, if you steal my car, I can steal your car, but I cannot burn down your house or kill your children in retaliation. Quid pro quo would be, “You bomb my village, my village will bomb your village.”

“If anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.” (Matthew 5:40) The coat (outer garment) was sometimes used by the very poor as collateral for a loan. (Deuteronomy 24:10-13) If the coat were used for collateral, it had to be returned to the person by nightfall so they could sleep in it. The next morning, however, the person’s creditors could come and get it again. The situation Jesus describes is one where a destitute peasant is getting pestered to the point of being sued for his underwear. If you’re getting sued for your underwear, give it up, Jesus says. But here’s the catch: Nakedness was considered shameful in the ancient world, and anyone who viewed a naked person was also shamed. Give your coat also is confrontational because it was exposing the entire oppressive system. And in another way, the person is asserting personal power by saying you can’t take something from me that I’m giving away.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” (Matthew 5:41) This refers to the practice of *angaria*. Forcing Jews into service of their oppressors was a common practice and, as you would suspect, highly resented. Abuses were so widespread that Rome itself later applied some limits to it. Carry the soldier’s pack another mile, and that soldier may have some explaining to do to his superiors.

Supplemental Resources

- Traditional hymns:
 - [“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”](#) (UMH 103)
 - [“O Love, How Deep”](#) (UMH 267)
 - [“Be Thou My Vision”](#) (UMH 451)
 - [“Jesus Calls Us”](#) (UMH 398)
 - [“Take My Life, and Let It Be”](#) (UMH 399)
 - [“Where Charity and Love Prevail”](#) (UMH 549)
 - “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace” (TFWS 2171)
- Contemporary songs:
 - [“Speak, O Lord,”](#) by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend (Singing the Faith, 161).
 - [“Be One,”](#) by Natalie Grant.
 - [“Better Is One Day,”](#) by Matt Redman.
 - [“Another Mile,”](#) by John Ylvisaker.



Further Reading

- "[Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1](#)," edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor.
- "[Choosing Change: How to Motivate Churches to Face the Future](#)," by Peter Coutts.
- "[Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship](#)," edited by Joel B. Green, et al.
- "[How My Mind Has Changed: Essays from the Christian Century](#)," edited by David Heim.
- "[After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory, 3rd Edition](#)," by Alasdair MacIntyre.
- "[The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday By Sunday, Cycle A](#)," by John J. Pilch.
- "[The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume III](#)," by Leander E. Keck, et al.



Sermon 3: A New Way

Writer: Rev. Jon Hoin

Scripture: Isaiah 55:3-9 | Matthew 5:43-48

Note to the Pastor

I grew up attending two different churches each Sunday morning. My mother played piano at a small country church after services at our local Methodist church, and I heard several sermons each week. Looking back, many of the sermons were about “what Jesus really meant.” Today, I preach these sermons too, but I usually do it because I am trying to fix somebody else’s explanation of “what Jesus really meant.” These discrepancies between the sermons we preach point to a conundrum: How do we know what Jesus really means?

Careful study helps, but often we are left to make decisions between different understandings of the text. Tradition is often unhelpful as early church fathers were typically the ones who started arguments about “what Jesus meant” in the first place. So pastors trust the mercy of the Holy Spirit alongside their own experience and reason. Today’s text is no different. Matthew 5:43-48 may seem clear, but theologians have argued over it for centuries.

In his article about Matthew 5:43-48, Will Willimon adds an additional wrinkle to our problem:

The Sermon on the Mount has suffered at the hands of interpreters over the centuries. Many, in an attempt to relieve their congregations of the burden of Jesus, have turned these words into an impossible ideal.¹³

Sometimes preachers approach a text with the best intentions, but they depart from the text determined to avoid hard teachings. So, in addition to worrying about understanding Matthew 5:43-48, pastors must be sure they find the courage to preach Jesus as he is.

Before going on, I encourage you to take a step back and read Matthew 5:43-48. Read it at face value. Ask yourself if your understanding of God allows for one who really does make “his sun rise on evil and good and makes it rain on righteous and unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). If no, read again until you have a yes. After all, the sun rises every day and, at least in South Carolina, it rains a lot on all of us. When you have your yes, I think you will have both the understanding and courage to preach the rest of this series.

Our series is about discipleship in service of a God of extravagant love, who brings rain and sun to all. Jesus preaches this God to his disciples. So, rather than seek to “relieve our congregations of the burden of Jesus,” let us seek to help them embrace this God with open arms. For Methodists, discipleship is ultimately about being so like Jesus that we love perfectly, as perfectly as our heavenly Father, and that includes our enemies.

Exegesis: 5:43-48

Verses 43-48 are a short pericope from the Sermon on the Mount; Augustine of Hippo viewed it as *sermo*, or a summary of Jesus’ teaching. In it, Jesus forgoes open-ended parables for short declarative

¹³ William H. Willimon, “[Matthew 5:43-48](#)”, *Interpretation* (January 2003).



sentences. Despite its brevity, Matthew 5:43-48 is an interpretive challenge for its reader. Disciples must decide how to fit Jesus' command to "love your enemies" into their ethics, and they may also need to re-evaluate their personal pictures of God. I have taken the position that love of enemies is a foundational commandment for Christian disciples, logically taking priority even before love of neighbor, and that our encounter with God is what enables us to love our enemies.

Jesus opens his teaching by quoting one popular interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, love your neighbor but hate your enemy, which was found in several religious sects of Jesus' time. Jesus follows by offering a counter-teaching, "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44). He then offers some follow-up explanations. Loving enemies means acting like children of God who, "makes his sun rise on evil and good" (5:45); it also means being distinct from community outsiders who love only those who love them (5:46-47). Finally, Jesus concludes with a second command saying, "you be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

A one-sentence summary of the pericope reads something like this: Be more like God, who is perfect, by loving your enemies. But what does that mean for discipleship? Early church thinkers offered two general possibilities. Love of enemies is the pinnacle of Christian discipleship reserved for the saints alone, as Augustine and Ambrose claim; or it is the most basic and distinctive practice of Christian disciples, as Clement of Alexandria contends. We can see that Jesus intends it to be a distinctive practice, and he offers it as a general command to anyone witnessing the Sermon on the Mount without exception (5:46-47). To be a disciple, rather than a gentile or tax collector, is to love one's enemy. Thus, I favor Clement's interpretation.

Furthermore, loving the enemy is a practice that is dependent on a disciple's sense of God's identity. "To be perfect as God is perfect" means embracing an approach to life that gives sun and rain to evil and good alike (5:45,48): A child of God shares in God's identity, embodying qualities of their source and participating in God's nature. Matthew's primary metaphor for God is a benevolent king seeking the wellbeing of his people: The metaphor "God as king" pairs with the "God as gardener" metaphor used in 5:45 (1:1-17,23; 4:17; 6:33; 13:1-52; 18:21-35; 22:1-22; 25:31-46). Jesus helps us understand how to practice faith by picturing kings forgiving debts and gardeners watering weeds; meanwhile, 5:43-48's lack of reference to retribution subtly reserves vengeance for God alone (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:17-19).

Using God's example, Jesus teaches us to love our enemies from the very beginning of our faith journeys. Loving our enemies is a distinctive Christian practice meant to mark Jesus' disciples as children of God, and Jesus offers no ulterior motive beyond God's example. We love our enemies because God has already loved us first, and God has claimed us as God's children (5:45,48). In the Methodist tradition, we call God's initial outpouring of love "prevenient grace," and it forms the foundation of our whole understanding of the gospel. God loves us first, no matter how bound up in the chains of sin we may be, and to be children of God means seriously following this example of perfect indiscriminate love, of freely extending that same gift of God's prevenient grace to others without hesitation.

Furthermore, the call to love our enemies affects our understanding of the gospel's other love commandments. If we take the idea of sin seriously, then we can also see that at times we are our own worst enemies. Jesus tells us our standard for loving our neighbors is how we want to be loved



(Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 22:35-40; Luke 10:27a; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). If we cannot love our enemies, then there will be times when we will be unable to love ourselves enough to know how to love our neighbors.

So loving our enemies logically forms the foundation for Matthew's ethics, which place love of God and neighbor at their center (22:36-40). Reciprocal love is good, but giving love that does not benefit us is what marks a true disciple of Jesus (5:46-47; 7:20-21). Even more significant is where Jesus directs this giving love. Up until now, I have avoided defining Jesus' use of the word enemy because it is used so generally. Context suggests that Jesus is preaching an all-encompassing love that is not limited by tribe, nation, ethnicity, relationship or personal feeling (28:18-20). As such, we must presume to place no limits on God's love, nor our own, lest we impede our own progress toward the kingdom of heaven. After all, Jesus says, "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (5:48)."

Sermon Outline

Main Message: Methodists believe discipleship is a process aimed at becoming more loving, more like Christ, and Matthew 5:43-48 impresses upon us that loving our enemies is a foundational practice, both possible and essential for our growth.

1. Theologian Karl Barth was once asked if he believed he'd see his loved ones again when he got to heaven. He replied, "Not only the loved ones."
2. Many sermons about this passage are confused. Jesus meant what he said. He said love your enemies, purely for the sake of loving them.
3. Human beings love categories, and there's a long history of religious people drawing lines to keep people out. It's easy to hate the people who don't treat you well. It's easy to love the folks who think and act just like you. And yet, Jesus said, "God makes the sun rise on the righteous and the unrighteous...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."
 - a. The history of Christianity concerning the end of this passage. Augustine of Hippo and Clement of Alexandria represent two opposing understandings of the text.
 - b. Scripture constantly presents us with the same conundrum. God does not subscribe to our definitions and our petty disputes. God can no more hate our enemies with us than a parent hates one of their two children at the behest of the other in a dispute over a toy. God loves people, even if we don't.
 - c. Though Christians are sometimes known for being self-righteous hypocrites, Christian doctrine is all too aware that human beings are flawed individuals participating in flawed systems (Sin).
 - d. Loving neighbors, loving self, loving enemies. If the dividing line between good and evil cuts through every heart, and if I cannot love my enemy, then how can I love myself? If I cannot love myself, then how can I love my neighbor? If I cannot love my neighbor, then how can I love God?



4. Loving our enemies is not the pinnacle of Christian discipleship, it is the foundation.
 - a. It may be “natural” to hate our enemies, but the kingdom of God is not a natural thing. It may be easy, but how often is the easy thing what we really want?
 - b. A true encounter with God’s kingdom work will shift our sense of what’s possible and transform our assumptions and dispositions. We must do something that does not come “naturally” to us.

The Wesleyan tradition speaks about this as moving toward perfect love.

5. Conclusion: How do we love our enemies? By:
 - a. Making connections.
 - b. Laying down labels.
 - c. Healing wounds, doing restorative justice, offering forgiveness.

The Sermon: “A New Way”

Many decades ago, the great theologian Karl Barth was asked, “Do you really believe that you’ll see your loved ones again in heaven?” I like to imagine Barth leaning back in a big leather chair chuckling to himself as he thinks about his answer, and after taking a big pause, replying, “Not only the loved ones.”

Barth’s words might seem scandalous. How could God have such low standards, letting all the people I hate into heaven? And yet, Jesus repeatedly tells us that God loves the people we love to hate, and he tells us we should love them too. And that love for our enemies, it is the foundation of everything we are as disciples of Jesus.

I must admit that I am not very good at this. I’ve moved around a lot in my life, partly because I’m a Methodist pastor and partly because of my dad’s job. When people ask me where I’m from, their eyes usually glaze over before I finish my list of childhood homes. Every time I move, it takes time to get used to the new place, and it takes time to grow to love it. In high school, I moved to Maryland. I arrived to find people dressed in shorts in the middle of a snowstorm, to see breadboxes instead of twist ties and bags used to store bread, and to learn that the Future Farmers of America was the biggest school club. We had moved from a fairly diverse suburb of Columbia, South Carolina, to a monolithic rural community, where everyone grew soybeans. Even the crops lacked diversity. When we attended our first local Boy Scout meeting, the troop stood on one side of the room, and we stood on the other.

In a thousand tiny ways, we heard people say, “You are different, not one of us.” Even compliments came off as a little backhanded, for example, “You don’t sound Southern.” It took us a long time to feel at home because of these many little differences. We had to build connections and friendships based on shared interests and dreams, and we all had to find our niche in the community. And I can say that it hasn’t gotten easier in the past fifteen years. Every time we go somewhere new, we spend time learning to love a new set of people who are often very different from the people we’ve met before.



I tell you this story because I want you to understand Jesus' words from today's reading. When he opens his mouth, he tells the people around him that they have to love their enemies. He's commenting on a dispute among the leaders in his culture over a passage from Leviticus. Some read Leviticus and they heard, "You must not hate your fellow Israelite in your heart...You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:17a,18)." And they thought, "Well, it really just says love my fellow Israelites. Don't hate anyone from my people." And they drew the line there. They said, "It's OK to hate anyone else because they are different." Every culture, religion and group of people in the world has somebody teaching folks to hate difference. But Jesus takes the other side. You must love your enemy. Even if they hate you and mistreat you, you must love them. Even if you can't understand them, relate to them, or find any common ground with them, you must love them.

It's tempting to try to explain Jesus' words away. I don't really have to love my enemies, do I? It should be enough just to tolerate them. Or maybe Jesus really meant that after a lifetime of practicing faith and a lot of help from God, we'll be magically transformed. So loving those awful people can wait until tomorrow. But in the end, if we are really hearing Jesus' words, and really taking them seriously, we can't explain it away. He's speaking as plainly as can be to the most ordinary of people, and he's telling them to love without caveat.

Taking Jesus seriously often takes us to strange places. He asks for so many unusual behaviors. Give your money away. Treat unrelated people like family. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Jesus asks us to do hard things that seem to go against our nature, and the hardest of these things is in today's passage. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Love the people who don't love you back, who are different from you, who despise you, who attack you. Love them without expecting a reward, or that they will change, or that some sort of cosmic justice will be done. Just love them.

Jesus tells us that it's easy to love the people who love us back, who look like us, who act like us, and who share our cultural heritage. But every person on Earth does that. Being a disciple of Jesus is going beyond what other people do. Jesus is teaching us to reach for an exceptional, extravagant, immersive kind of love. Jesus is teaching us that disciples love humanly, but even more so, they love divinely. And God's divine love makes the sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous. God's divine love brings rain to the good and the evil. God's love gives grace to the saint and the sinner. And so should your love.

Some early Christian teachers tried to push this teaching aside. They tried to reserve it as a final spiritual stage for only the most saintly people, but I think that if we are honest, we can only see this as a foundational Christian teaching. We know that there is imperfection, brokenness and entropy in our shared lives, and we know that all of those things are in our hearts. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author who wrote about his life in Stalin's Gulag, wrote in "The Gulag Archipelago" that, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart." If anyone had an excuse to hate someone, it was Solzhenitsyn. He was sent away by his friends to starve or freeze, whichever came first, over a private letter. And yet he knew this truth: Everyone has the potential for great good and terrible evil. To be human is to know that we are flawed creatures, and in our heart of hearts, we are our own worst enemies.



And so a curious thing happens when we put all of Jesus' various thoughts about love together with this idea that we can be our own enemies. Jesus tells us that loving God is the greatest commandment. Second is loving our neighbors, and we can know how to love our neighbors by imagining how we want to be loved. But we should also love our enemies, like God loves them. Here's the catch. If we know that we can be our own enemies in our heart of hearts, and if we have not learned to love our enemies, then we cannot possibly love ourselves, and that keeps us from loving our neighbors. It's all connected. We love extravagantly as God does because it is only through God's eyes that we can truly understand how to love at all. And if God can see my flawed, limited, mortal self as worthy of love, then I can see myself that way, and I can see others that way, no matter how different they may be or how they may treat me.

So how do we love our enemies? We treat them as God does. We give them nourishing rain and abundant sunshine. Some time ago, we had a problem in our community. Our local blessing box, a kind of outdoor easy access food pantry, was being emptied at an alarming rate. Somebody appeared to be taking all the food, more than any single family could eat in a week. Many folks in our congregation felt taken advantage of. Most of the food was just being taken out, but some was being opened and wasted. We found a jar of peanut butter left on our church playground opened with a single finger sized scoop of peanut butter removed. Many members of our congregation were hurt. This was a flagrant abuse of their generosity. Some folks just wanted to throw in the towel and be completely done with the whole thing. If people couldn't play by the rules, it was time to end the game. As we spoke, one of the pillars of the congregation stood up, and she announced, "I think we should keep putting food in the box, and I think we should fill it up as many times as it takes. If people are taking too much, then that's between them and God. Our job is to do good, and that includes the folks who bother us." Then she sat down, and she didn't say anything the rest of the meeting. Her words settled the conversation. We would continue to share food extravagantly. Though we did decide to try to make sure folks on the property were keeping an eye on the box. We were hoping to inquire about why they felt they needed so much food and if there was something more we could do.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he invites us to love people without exception. We should also recognize that means really loving them. As Methodists, our ethics are do no harm, do good, and love God. Loving our enemies does not mean turning a blind eye to abuse, suffering and neglect. Our God also brings justice through grace. We can still do good and prevent harm while loving without exception. At the end of the day, the fullness of God's kingdom requires us to live into it all, and loving our enemies is the beginning of the journey.

Once we have decided to love extravagantly, we can find new ways to build the beloved community together. We can lay down our labels and our weapons. We can make new connections. We can do the work of building others up in a way that brings an end to all abuse, suffering and neglect without leaving anyone behind. So, with this vision in your heart, may you feel God's rain quenching your thirst and God's sun illuminating your path. May you remember that God gives these to all, and may you remember that we all are called to do the same as disciples of the risen Christ. Amen.



Other Illustrations

Personal stories of forgiveness and/or reconciliation from your life are primary. Often, stories of forgiveness and reconciliation begin with loving an enemy as a first step. When preaching on this passage, personal stories will make a big difference. Consider one of your own stories where you have loved or been loved by an enemy.

- Consider [the story of Leroy Smith](#), a Black police officer who gave medical assistance to a KKK member/Nazi sympathizer showing signs of heat stroke at a rally in Columbia, South Carolina. The rally took place just after Dylan Roof's racist rampage at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where Roof murdered nine people. Smith was later quoted as saying that he hoped his act of care would catalyze the work of overcoming hatred and bigotry in South Carolina. Smith's actions represent a clear example of loving an enemy who does not offer any reciprocal love.
- Reflections from the 2020 vision paper "[Out of Chaos...Creation: Seeds of a Vision for a Renewed United Methodism](#)." The statement offers an invitation to United Methodists to lean into the calling to bring people together around a common table. This resource would be useful for expanding the sermon to comment on broader institutional concerns in the United Methodist Church.

Supplemental Resources

- Videos:
 - "[Agape-Love](#)," animated video from The Bible Project.
 - "[Love Your Enemies](#)," Martin Luther King Jr's speech at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, November 17, 1957.
 - "[Love Thy Enemies](#)," by Alan Watts.
 - "[What do you do to forgive someone?](#)" a brief conversation with Desmond Tutu on practicing forgiveness.
- Music:
 - "[Perfect Us in Love](#)," by Charles Wesley and Taylor Burton-Edwards.
 - "[Jesus Loves Me](#)" (UMH 191) ○ "[We Meet You, O Christ](#)" (UMH 257).
 - "[O Love, How Deep](#)" (UMH 267)
 - "[Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast](#)" (UMH 339)
 - "[Lord, I Want to Be a Christian](#)" (UMH 402)
 - "[Dear Lord, Lead Me Day by Day](#)" (UMH 411)
 - "[Jesus, Thine All-Victorious Love](#)" (UMH 422)



Further Reading

- "[Matthew: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching](#)," by Douglas R.A. Hare.
- "[Matthew 1-7: A Commentary](#)," by Ulrich Luz, edited by Helmut Koester, translated by James E. Crouch.
- "[The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956](#)," by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.
- "[Love Your Heavenly Enemy: How Are We Going to Live Eternally with Those We Can't Stand Now?](#)" by Miroslav Volf, *Christianity Today* (October 23, 2000).
- "[Matthew 5:43-48](#)," by William H. Willimon, *Interpretation* (January 1, 2003).



Sermon 4: New Actions

Writer: Rev. Edward Stallworth

Scripture: Amos 5:14-15 | Luke 10:25-37

Note to the Pastor

Jesus lived in a divided time, so his telling of a parable about a Samaritan being a good neighbor to a Jewish lawyer was divisive, subversive and shocking. The parable was also beautiful, poetic and thought provoking. With a simple story about some bandits, their Jewish victim and a Samaritan, Jesus took down a wall of sectarianism and racism and started building a table where reconciliation was possible.

Like Jesus, we are also living in a divided time. We are divided as a nation where, on one side, people are protesting in our streets demanding change while, on the other side, people don't see the need for any change. We live in a time when racial tensions are high, sexual harassment is called out, cultural shifts are being made, sectarian politics are creating rage and even violence, and what the future holds seems uncertain. How do we tear down these walls that divide us in these difficult times?

We are divided as a denomination in which the debate over human sexuality has reached a fever pitch. This debate has caused hurt and anger among laity, and it has even ended friendships among clergy as thoughtful dialogue turns into enraged arguments. We are at a crossroads where difficult and painful decisions are being made. How do we build a table of reconciliation in these challenging times?

Finally, there is even division in our local churches as our numbers shrink because people no longer think church is relevant to their lives. We ask, "What is the best way to move forward? What decisions do we really need to make?" only to find that we cannot, as a church body, agree on the answer to any of these questions. In frustration, some long-time church leaders are leaving for good. How do we become neighbors once again?

It is difficult to preach in these divided times. However, Jesus tells a story to a Jewish lawyer of a Samaritan who loved his enemy – a Jewish person left in a ditch – and cared for him. Jesus then has the audacity to tell the lawyer to be like the hated Samaritan. If we can preach that – to care for all people – and give personal examples of doing that, then maybe we can finish the table Jesus started to build.

Exegesis: Luke 10:25-37

"The Good Samaritan" is one of those stories familiar even to those who have never stepped foot in a church or heard a sermon on Luke 10:25-37. There are hospitals, mission groups and other organizations who use the name "Samaritan" to convey that they are devoted to helping those in need. South Carolina and several other states have "Good Samaritan" laws that protect people who offer help or render aid to those in need. "Samaritan" has come to mean helpful, caring, noble and, most of all, charitable. Shouldn't we all want to be a Samaritan? However, when Jesus told this parable to a Jewish lawyer, "Samaritan" didn't mean noble or charitable; it meant an enemy to hate or "the other" to ignore.



Jesus' example of the Samaritan as the good neighbor was provocative and radical. The Jewish people considered Samaritans as deplorable, and Samaritans regarded Jewish people as appalling. When the Jewish lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbor," and Jesus responds with a story about some bandits, their Jewish victim, and a helpful Samaritan, the lawyer would have been shocked and even incensed.

Jesus makes the parable even more provocative by stating that two fellow Jewish people, a Levite and a priest, fail to help. The Levite and the priest shared the same values and lived in the same country as both the man in the ditch and the lawyer who asked the question. Jesus doesn't explain why they didn't help, though Martin Luther King Jr. surmised it was because they were afraid. Jewish law was not one of the reasons; both the priest and the Levite would have been obligated to help. After all, the man was still alive, albeit barely, and was in need. Furthermore, had he been dead, both the priest and the Levite would have been obligated to bury him. We need to note that Jesus was not justifying anti-Semitic ideologies. If this were not a parable to exemplify a point, but an historical account, the Levite and priest would have helped their fellow traveler. However, this is a parable making a point. Being a "neighbor" is not about the proximity of where one lives or any cultural, ideological, racial or even religious similarities people may share. Being a neighbor is loving someone even when cultural, ideological, racial and religious identities are at odds with one another.

The Samaritan, the last person a Jewish person would call a neighbor, is the one who helped. This means the parable is not just about being kind. It is not just about helping those in need. It is about tearing down the walls that separate us from loving one another. It is realizing that we are all traveling a road filled with bandits, and there will come a time when we need to help each other out, to help regardless of any differences we may have or any discriminatory biases we may carry. This parable is telling us to tear down those walls that separate us and build tables where we can find togetherness and reconciliation. We must always choose love over hate, compassion over apathy, and grace over ideological differences. We must choose to be welcoming and inclusive of all people. This parable moves from being provocative to life-giving.

Sermon Outline

Introduction: Ever watch a movie that shocked you? Unexpected plot twists? An ending you didn't see happening? This parable keeps you at the edge of your seat with a shocking plot twist.

1. Starts with a simple question: "And who is my neighbor?" Dimensions of question.
 - a. Literary device: the logical sequence of threes. Jesus said, "a priest and a Levite." Jews considered Samaritans terrible neighbors.
 - b. Modern-day examples. But do I need to give examples?
2. Jewish person in the parable wasn't just robbed of his belongings. Stripped of his dignity. Exposed and left for dead.
 - a. Amy-Jill Levine commentary on responsibility of priest and Levite.
 - b. Martin Luther King Jr., concerning fear shown by priest and Levite.



3. Do we find ourselves like the priest and the Levite?
 - a. Not helping out of fear.
 - b. Not helping because of indifference.
 - c. Not helping out of spite.
4. The Samaritan changed the question from, "If I help, what will happen to me?" to, "If I don't help, what will happen to him?" We must ask the same question.
 - a. If we do not strive for justice, what will happen to the oppressed?
 - b. If we do not fight against poverty, what will happen to the poor?
 - c. If we do not demand compassion, what will happen to the marginalized?
 - d. If we do not speak out for equality, what will happen to the disenfranchised?
5. The journey of faith/life is difficult. There are bandits who would steal our humanity, who would rob us of our integrity, who would have us walk past the injustice and take away our empathy. We may also find ourselves in ditches.
 - a. Personal example of man who did not like me or my ministry and the change that happened.
 - b. We may never agree on much of anything, but love has a way of us agreeing on the important things.
 - i. "And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked.
 - ii. Jesus tells a story about a Samaritan who helped a Jewish person.
6. Conclusion: Jesus tells the lawyer to go and do likewise.
 - a. To be like the Samaritan who he had been taught to despise.
 - b. See beyond the differences.
 - c. See beyond the divides.
 - d. See all as made in the image of God.

The Sermon: "New Actions"

"And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. And Jesus began to tell a story about some bandits, their Jewish victim, and a Samaritan.

Ever watch a movie that shocked you? That had an unexpected plot twist or an ending you never saw coming? No spoiler alerts – I don't want to ruin any movie for you. Alfred Hitchcock was a master at this. Jordan Peele is trying to do this now. Or watch "The Sixth Sense." Like a good shocking movie, the story in today's Scripture put the audience on the edge of their seats and then jolted them with a big plot twist.



"And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. It is a completely understandable question, considering that this Jesus had rudely criticized Jewish leaders at a dinner party, yet gone out of his way to help Gentiles – healing a Roman centurion's servant, for example, or crossing a stormy sea to help a non-Jewish Gerasene regain his humanity. Wouldn't a "good neighbor" deny a centurion oppressor and ignore a sick Gentile in order to comfort people of his own faith and support their leaders? Yes, the lawyer asked what must have seemed like a reasonable question, only to have Jesus highlight a Samaritan as an example of a good neighbor. It was shocking!

Even the way Jesus introduced the story was shocking. He used a literary device known as the "logical sequence of threes." Finish this line of thinking: Stop, collaborate and (pause) listen. Life, liberty and (pause) the pursuit of happiness. Father, Son and (pause) Holy Spirit. When Jesus told this story to the lawyer, he said, "a priest and a Levite and..." and the lawyer would have expected to hear next, "an Israelite." Instead – shock – "Samaritan." A Samaritan!

Most Samaritans wished ill for the Jewish people, which made sense because most Jewish people wished ill for the Samaritans. And let me be clear: This goes beyond cultural or political rivalry. We are not talking Clemson versus South Carolina in football or Duke versus North Carolina in basketball. "Samaritan" was a Jewish trigger word for hate, and "Jewish" was a Samaritan trigger word for rage. I could cite some modern examples of such words, but if I did, I would sound racist, xenophobic, intolerant and hateful.

And, sad to say, there is no need for me to cite examples. We've all seen talking heads on cable news belittle the "other side." We've all seen "friends" on social media lash out against thoughts and opinions that differ from their own. Perhaps you've even heard someone at a family gathering use an ugly word – a slur like "Samaritan" – expecting you to nod in appreciation. So it was shocking to hear Jesus tell a story about a Samaritan helping a Jew.

Now this Jewish victim wasn't just robbed of his belongings. He was stripped of his dignity; he was exposed and made vulnerable to other bandits, and then left for dead in a ditch on a dangerous road. A priest and a Levite, upright members of the Jewish community, came by and did not stop to help. Didn't even slow down. Crossed the road, turned their heads, didn't look back. Some say they couldn't help because of purity laws. Hogwash! According to Amy-Jill Levine, Jewish scholar of New Testament and professor at Vanderbilt University, "the man who was robbed was still alive. The priest and the Levite would have been obligated to help. Had he been dead, they would have been obligated to bury him."

In the sermon, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Martin Luther King Jr. surmised that the priest and the Levite were simply afraid. The road was dangerous and there were bandits everywhere. King said the priest and Levite must have asked themselves, "If I help, what will happen to me?"

"If I help ... what will happen ... to me?"

How easy – how human – it would have been for the Samaritan to ask himself that question. Or to conjure up some obscure "purity law." Or, easiest of all, to think: "He's not like me. Why should I help?"

But the Samaritan made none of these excuses. Instead, as Rev. King said, the Samaritan asked another question: "If I don't help, what will happen to him?"



We can ask the same question of ourselves. If we do not strive for justice, what will happen to the oppressed? If we do not fight poverty, what will happen to the poor? If we do not model compassion, what will happen to the marginalized? If we do not speak out for equality, what will happen to the disenfranchised? The Samaritan didn't see a Jewish person beaten and left for dead. He didn't see an enemy to be hated or ignored. Instead, he saw a child of God in need. And he helped. Because if not him, then who? If not us – if not you and me – then who?

"And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. And Jesus tells a story about some bandits, their Jewish victim, and a Samaritan.

Jesus is telling us that the journey of faith is difficult because there are bandits who would steal our humanity and have us shun those who are different. Be like the Samaritan and choose kindness. There are bandits who would rob us of our integrity, who would have us walk past the injustice we see with our own eyes. Be like the Samaritan, stop and act boldly. There are bandits who would take away our empathy, who whisper that victims brought it on themselves. Be like the Samaritan and serve those who suffer. There are bandits on our journey of faith, and there are also those who walk by, refusing to help, sometimes out of fear and sometimes out of spite. Let us be as the Samaritan and love our neighbor, without exception, and show mercy to all.

The journey of faith is difficult, and any one of us might one day be beaten down, stripped of dignity, stranded, hopeless. A neighbor – regardless of how they look, where they are from, what they believe – is the one who helps.

Some years ago, I met a man, not in this church, who didn't like my thinking, disagreed with my theology, hated my politics, and, hard to believe, didn't care for my personality. He said I was too loud. In other words, he didn't like a single thing about me. He asked, "What kind of 'pastor' are you?" and I could hear the sarcastic quotation marks around the word "pastor." I said, "I'm a pastor who loves and welcomes everybody." He then retorted, "Well, you'll never be my pastor." I snapped back, "Well, you do you." I thought that would be the last I saw of him, except perhaps by chance at the grocery store or around town.

Sometime later, on a rainy evening after work, my minivan wouldn't start. I popped my hood and realized the battery was dead. This man happened to drive by. He stopped and asked if I needed help. Then he set about charging my battery. We talked a little, laughed some, I thanked him, and I was on my way. I had been stranded, and he helped me out. About a year later, maybe two years, I officiated at a funeral, and he was there. We said hello, chatted a bit, and that was that. A week later, I received a note that said, "I changed my mind. You are one of my pastors. Thank you for the wonderful service, and I hope you finally changed that battery."

"And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. For me, it was a man I had dismissed, but when I needed help, he was there.

"And who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. For this man who charged my battery, it was me, a pastor of dubious theology, who helped him grieve a good friend. He was in pain, and I was there. This man and I may never agree on much of anything, but we found in each other a Samaritan, a neighbor, a child of God.



After telling this parable, Jesus instructs the lawyer to go and do likewise, to go and be like the Samaritan, the very person he had been taught to despise. Jesus was saying that life is a tough journey for everybody, but if we can see our enemies as neighbors, if we can be the hands and feet of God to all people, then the road becomes a little easier to travel.

If we can do that – if we can twist that timeworn, tired plot of fear, indifference and hatred into a story of grace, compassion and justice for all – well, now, wouldn't that be shocking? Wouldn't that bring heaven to earth?

Want to follow in the ways of Jesus? Be a neighbor to all people. Amen.

Other Illustrations

- Civil Rights leader Howard Thurman, who was born in 1899, told of how his family scraped together the funds to send him to high school in Jacksonville, Florida – then one of only three high schools for African-Americans in the state of Florida. At the train station, Thurman was told he had to pay extra to send his baggage. Thurman had no money to ship his belongings, sat down on the steps and began to cry. He says a stranger, a black man dressed in overalls, walked by and paid the charges. He didn't introduce himself, and Thurman never learned his name. "When Thurman wrote his autobiography, he dedicated it 'to the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago.'"¹⁴
- In the musical "[Les Misérables](#)," escaped convict Jean Valjean steals from the local parish priest. When caught, the priest not only covers for Jean Valjean, but gives him more items to sell. The act of kindness by the priest transforms Jean Valjean into a leader who helps others, as well.
- In the movie "[Forrest Gump](#)," Lieutenant Dan and Forrest were two unlikely friends, coming from differing perspectives, who helped each other out. Their friendship developed because Forrest, the Samaritan, was persistent in helping Dan when he was in need.
- A 2016 article from "America" magazine provides insight into Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan and contemporary matters: "[Who became a neighbor? Reading Black Lives Matter through the Good Samaritan](#)," by Sam Sawyer, S.J.

Supplemental Resources

- Video:
 - "[The Good Samaritan: A Bible Story for Children](#)," a wonderful video from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in which children retell the story of the Good Samaritan.

¹⁴ "[This Far By Faith: Howard Thurman](#)", PBS.org, accessed August 19, 2021



- Music:
 - "The Servant Song" (TFWS 2222), a contemporary hymn about being pilgrims on a journey.
 - "Live in Charity (Ubi Caritas)" (TFWS 2179)
 - "[Where Charity and Love Prevail](#)" (UMH 549)
 - "The Summons" (TFWS 2130)

Further Reading

- "[Five Marks of a Methodist: The Fruit of a Living Faith](#)," by Steve Harper.
- "[Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World](#)," by Henri Nouwen.



Sermon 5: The Way of Justice

Writer: Rev. Timothy Drum

Scripture: Micah 4:1-4 | 1 Peter 3:8-12

Note to the Pastor

In approaching this passage, I felt that this scripture lent itself well to preaching about peace. At first, it might seem that a sermon focused mostly on war and peace doesn't fit into a series about Christian discipleship. However, I contend that it does. I hope that you will stay with me.

I am blessed to work at Spartanburg Methodist College, and one of the most amazing parts of my job is that the administration lets me teach a course each semester! One thing I have learned is that life events surrounding a student make a significant impact on their performance in class. Consider a student who is working two jobs, sleeping less than six hours a night, and regularly missing meals. This student will not be engaged in classroom discussion and will probably nod off during the lecture. She or he will also struggle on tests and fall behind on assignments. It is difficult to concentrate on your coursework if you are tired and hungry.

In the same way, it is far more difficult to concentrate on growing closer to Christ when you live in constant fear of violence. That is not to say that spiritual growth doesn't occur in crisis, but a person can only concentrate on so much at once. A calm, peaceful environment lends itself to the type of introspection and prayer that is so helpful in deepening spiritual practices.

In the case of the student, any number of factors could help her out. She could get a job that pays better, allowing her to work fewer hours. She could be directed to the campus food pantry to help with her hunger. With the help of some caring folks, she can free herself up to concentrate on her schoolwork.

Here is where the peacemaking emphasis comes in. Peace is not just agreeing not to kill one another. Indeed, that is just the bare minimum of caring for others. Peacemaking means giving thought to the way personal, interpersonal and systemic issues affect others. It is easy to focus on peacemaking in personal relationships. However, it is important that we think about how our collective action (or inaction) as a nation hurts or helps others.

This sermon could be adapted to speak about interpersonal, rather than international, dynamics. We live in a world right now where we are at each other's throats. Democrats and Republicans fight over politics, anti-vaxxers fight with maskers, and Clemson fans fight with UofSC fans. We hurl bombs at each other on social media, and even become alienated from our families and church families. How can we focus on growing closer to Christ when we are focused on distancing ourselves from one another?

Exegesis: Micah 4:1-4

The first image in this passage is very important. The text begins with a vision of the mountain of the Lord's Temple. When you look at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, it really isn't all that impressive in terms of height – it is really more like a hill. Likewise, the nation of Judah was then pretty inconsequential on the global stage. The image here shows that small mountain lifted up higher to be



the highest of all mountains. You can make the argument that the Temple Mount, or Zion, takes the place here of Mt. Sinai. Just as God gave the Torah to Moses on the mountain, so God will share the law from the temple mountain. This law would be not just for the Jews, but for all nations.

Along with this image comes a change in direction. The nation of Judah had to take its direction from the nation of Assyria, and the nation had to obey for fear of military reprisal. This is the way disputes between nations were settled. Whoever has the most soldiers and swords gets to settle arguments. If you want to disagree with the most powerful nation, you are welcome to say so, but you will pay the price of burned fields, destroyed cities and possible exile. Remember, that is what happened to the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Consider also the difference between a sword and a plowshare. A sword is designed to cause damage to a body. It should be able to move through the air easily and puncture defensive armor. However, that design would be almost useless for agriculture. Imagine trying to tend a row in your garden with a broadsword! In contrast, a plowshare is designed to cut through soil and move rocks out of the way. Turning a sword into a plowshare makes the sword no longer useful for death. Instead, the metal is now only useful for helping to support life.

Micah's name means "Who is Like God!" The end-of-sentence punctuation makes a difference. Either you are asking a question or making an exclamation of joy. Micah's name is a statement about God's primacy over all other rulers.

Micah's hometown of Moresheth-Gath means "possession of Gath." The town of Gath was the place of origin of the Philistine warrior Goliath. So it is possible that even the name of Micah's hometown bears the scars of military domination. It is also very appropriate that Goliath's town is the one that was in charge, as Goliath is a major symbol of military power. Also, we remember, as did the people of Judah, that all of Goliath's power didn't hold up to a young man named David who had a slingshot and the power of God.

Sermon Outline

1. Introduction: The musical Hamilton and its presentation of George Washington's farewell.
 - a. Impact of war on Washington and, by extension, all people.
2. Micah the prophet and his ministry: location, history.
3. Micah tells of the new vision that comes from God – a message of hope.
4. Justice/injustice today: One example of the cost of war is the harm and destruction caused by the many landmines still hidden in warzones.
5. Admonishment from 1 Peter 3:9 and practical implications of this text.
6. Conclusion: Elevate the Lord above all decision-makers. Be a blessed peacemaker. Beat swords into plowshares.



The Sermon: “The Way of Justice”

In the Broadway musical “Hamilton,” one of the most compelling scenes features the main character coming to terms with the fact that his mentor, George Washington, is going to step down as President. This scene is excellently portrayed by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Christopher Jackson. In the scene, President Washington expresses his love for the fledgling nation he helped found, as well as a deep desire for contentment and peace. The former general even quotes this passage from Micah, longing to sit under his own vine and fig tree. We as viewers long for peace along with this great figure in our nation’s history, but not just for the great man, but for all people.

I find this scene so compelling, in part, because of the inherent contrast embodied in George Washington, our nation and the world in which we live. President Washington longs for peace and safety for himself and for those citizens he serves. This is the same General Washington who spent much of his life devoted to war, first for Britain and then for the rebellious colonies that became the United States of America. Do you see the conflict? Not just in George Washington, but in the nation he helped found. We long for peace, and yet continue to be engaged in conflict after conflict across the globe.

Consider the War for Independence, for example. As American wars go, it was a small, short conflict. And yet, the toll was staggering. Historians estimate that almost 7,000 American soldiers died, 6,000 were wounded, and 20,000 were imprisoned. On the opposite side of the conflict, 24,000 British soldiers perished. Another 17,000 people died as a result of disease, both military and civilians. Each of these nearly 48,000 people who were lost was someone’s son, father, mother or child. The effects of hunger, poverty and loss simply compound the tragedy. So George Washington is a man who has seen firsthand the terrible price of war.

Much like the theatrical “Hamilton,” the stories of war are often told about and from the point of view of great men like President George Washington. But what about the common people who suffer in the shadows, without historians or Broadway shows?

The prophet Micah was just such a man. He was a prophet in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the late 8th century. His prophetic career spans two kings: the weak and ineffective Ahaz and Hezekiah, both overwhelmed by the power of Assyria. The Northern Kingdom had been destroyed in King Hoshea’s attempted revolt, and most of the population had been sent into exile. Micah’s nation survived, but under the occupation of the Assyrians. The actions and inactions of leaders like Ahaz and Hezekiah had major historical effects for the history of the nation of Judah. These leaders had to deal with the fallout of their decisions and the impact on their legacy.

Meanwhile, Judah was full of people like Micah. He was from Moresheth-Gath. Never heard of it? That’s not really a surprise. It was a border town, meaning that Micah and his fellow villagers were under constant threat of capture or destruction by the empire next door. Micah spent much of his prophetic career railing against leaders who plotted evil for the people and warning them that destruction was at hand. Ahaz could capitulate, and Hezekiah could struggle, but as long as they didn’t rock the boat with the Assyrians too much, they would be fine. They could go back to their palaces and fields in relative safety. Not so for the people of Moresheth-Gath. In 701, the Assyrian King Sennacherib attacked and conquered almost 50 towns in Judah, including neighbors of Micah’s town. Only when Hezekiah pays a ransom to the Assyrians does the rampage come to an end.



So Micah has seen on a national and local level what happens when military might is wielded against those less powerful. I imagine Micah looking at the nearby towns in smoldering ruins and hearing God's message to prophesy that Jerusalem will soon "become a heap of rubble" (Micah 3:12). There is a certain poetic nature to Micah's proclamation that "Zion will be plowed like a field," while keeping in mind the charred, destroyed fields of his region. As was the case in the American Revolution, so it was for the people of Judah: The common people suffer the most in war.

But Micah makes a pronounced shift in his prophecy starting in our passage. The new vision he shares is of the Holy City being raised up, not torn down. No longer does foolishness and evil flow from Jerusalem; instead, teaching and leadership flow from the mountain of the Lord. No longer is the nation of Judah bowing down in submission to a more powerful adversary; now the nations are coming to learn on the mountain of God! How does such a massive change happen? It has to do with who is being listened to and how disputes are settled.

In Micah 3, and basically throughout the whole scope of human history, human leaders are the ones giving the orders. Leaders desire power and are never satisfied. The language of the king, the president or the prime minister is the language of power and violence. This violence begets violence, which leads to retribution and death. Disputes are settled with swords, chariots and horses. Meanwhile, it is the common soldier and the everyday people in the villages who bear the brunt of the death and suffering. It is not the king's fields that are burned, but rather those of the tenant farmer eking out a living from the earth. It is not the palace that is destroyed, but the family homes of the merchants and workers in towns like Micah's. It is not the king's son who dies, but the children of the poor who starve and die of preventable diseases.

Micah 4 presents an alternate vision, one of hope and peace. In Micah 4, the Lord is the one giving the instructions. The nations listen to the Lord. Disputes are settled by appealing to the Lord, not by seeing who can kill more people faster. Power and authority belong to God! So if the nations are not busy duking it out amongst themselves, then they don't need the tactics, brutality and machinery of war. In fact, even the weapons that were designed to take life can be repurposed to give life through agriculture. The fields are now ripe for planting with those new farm implements. Houses are filled with joy, without missing spots at the tables. Micah speaks of a future in which "Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid." What a wonderful vision of peace!

This peace Micah speaks of is not an armistice or a cease-fire. Those are temporary pauses of violence after which the fighting and death picks up later. It takes 3-5 years for a fig tree to produce fruit! To sit under your own fig tree, you must have peace. You need time to fertilize, trim and take care of the tree. If you are living in constant fear of war and death, you have no time for those things.

I began this sermon speaking about President George Washington, who longed for peace after a lifetime of war. When his presidency ended, he lived just two years, mostly spent restoring his Mount Vernon estate, which had fallen into disarray. What might have been for George and Martha Washington had his life not been spent in war followed by political leadership? What might have been for the untold thousands who died in battle and of disease during the Revolutionary War? What might have been for the families of those who never came back to Great Britain?



Even in a relatively small war, the human cost is nearly immeasurable. Still today, our world bears the scars of simmering conflicts, cold wars and active battle. Our world is covered with landmines buried underground as a reminder of conflicts past. In Egypt alone, there are 23 million landmines. Land that could be used to give life must be fenced off because it can only bring death. Not to the warring factions the mines were buried for, but to innocent civilians, including children. In many cases, the mines remain buried long after the people even remember why they were put there.

In each conflict, leaders inspire their people to fight and kill and die for many reasons. All of which seem very important at a high level. But ask the villagers who must eke out a living on land that is filled with spent munitions if it was worth it, and you will probably get a different answer. Ask the resident of a border town if the wall in their backyard is a worthwhile price to pay for a geopolitical conflict, and they will give you a different answer.

To this day, our country has not pledged to ban landmines, which disproportionately harm defenseless, poor civilians. We have a stockpile of 3 million of them. We spent \$676 billion for defense in 2019. That's a lot of money for swords.

What if we started turning our swords into plowshares? What if we stopped solving our disputes with violence and killing? What if we listened to the Lord, instead of the powerful?

In 1 Peter 3:9 comes this admonishment: "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing."

What if we took that advice seriously?

In our personal lives, by not having to one-up that person who hurt us or made us angry on social media.

In our home lives, by not inflicting violence on our children or loved ones.

In our work lives, by building one another up rather than stepping on others to climb the ladder.

In our towns and cities, by promoting equity and restorative justice instead of inequality and retributive punishment.

In our world, by putting our money where our mouths are and turning our swords into plowshares. What if we went about waging peace with the passion with which we wage war? What if we committed to removing the scars of colonialism, war and suffering?

The only way we move from Micah 3 to Micah 4 is by elevating the Lord above all other authorities. We can let the Lord handle the vengeance. We can let the Lord settle the disputes. What might our world look like if we helped others to bring life so that we can all live in peace and safety? Some crazy folks are actually out there working to literally hammer guns into gardening tools!

It may sound crazy, but Micah's vision also sounded crazy in his time. Hamilton thought Washington was crazy to say goodbye and pass on leadership. Abolitionists seemed crazy when they advocated for the end of the slave trade. Civil Rights activists like John Lewis were derided as crazy when they got students together to advocate for equality. All new ideas seem crazy until they aren't. You have a



card-sized device in your pocket that can access the sum total of human knowledge, keep you from getting lost, and order you a pizza. And we worry about being crazy.

How can we be a good kind of crazy? Elevate the Lord above all decision-makers in your life. Be a blessed peacemaker. Beat your swords into plowshares. Lay down your sword and shield. Stop studying war and read your almanac. It is time to plant some figs.

Other Illustrations

Information in these links are not cited directly in the sermon, but may be helpful for further reading and study:

- "[Landmines in Israel](#)," a Hebrew Language Blog post that examines the problems caused by landmines in Israel.
- "[The U.S. Poet Laureate](#)," an episode of "The West Wing" television show that focuses on the U.S. response to a landmine treaty.
- "[Discretionary Spending in 2019: An Infographic](#)," a breakdown of discretionary spending in the U.S. federal government.
- "[Shane Claiborne and Activists Turned Guns into Gardening Tools to Show What Beating 'Swords into Plowshares' Looks Like](#)," a Relevant magazine article.
- "[When should fig trees start to produce ripened fruit?](#)" a New Orleans Times-Picayune column.
- "[One Last Time](#)," featuring President George Washington's farewell speech from the musical "Hamilton."

These songs consider matters of war, peace and justice:

- "[Hero of the Day](#)," a Metallica song reminiscent of listening to an old soldier speak about the horrors of war.
- "[Brothers in Arms](#)," a Dire Straits song that provides a melancholy meditation on the Vietnam War.
- "[Eve of Destruction](#)," a Barry McGwire song with a more pessimistic look at the violence around the world in the 1960s.

Supplemental Resources

- Video:
 - "[Down by the Riverside](#)," by Louis Armstrong.
 - "[The Good Samaritan: A Bible Story for Children](#)," a wonderful video from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in which children retell the story of the Good Samaritan.



- Traditional Hymns:
 - [“Crown Him with Many Crowns”](#) (UMH 327)
 - [“O Day of Peace That Dimly Shines”](#) (UMH 729)
 - [“For the Healing of the Nations”](#) (UMH 428)
 - [“We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations”](#) (UMH 569)
 - [“The Church’s One Foundation”](#) (UMH 546)
- Contemporary/Blended Music:
 - “Higher Ground” ([Songs of Zion 39](#)) ([Celebration Hymnal 549](#))
 - [“Come, Let Us Go Up,”](#) performed by Paul Wilbur.

Further Reading

- “Introduction to Micah,” by Philip J. King, [HarperCollins Study Bible](#).
- [“Micah Through Malachi,”](#) Cokesbury Basic Bible Commentary, pp. 9-10, 34-35.



Sermon 6: The Way of Love

Writer: Rev. Cameron Levi

Scripture: Isaiah 64:17-25 | 1 John 3:11-24

Note to the Pastor

When reading, teaching, meditating, praying and preaching on 1 John, it is important to consider how much this short letter plays in our understanding of God. Mark Allan Powell notes that most people know that Christianity proclaims that “God is love.”¹⁵ That statement pervades our doctrines, theology and practice. Powell says, “Some people might think it’s found in every book of the Bible and on practically every page.”¹⁶ However, a quick search on any Bible software will reveal that the statement, “God is love,” only appears twice in the entire Bible.¹⁷ Both occurrences take place here in 1 John (4:8, 4:16). Before looking elsewhere, let us first consider what God’s nature of love looks like for the author who has so plainly revealed this truth that now permeates our exegesis, preaching, evangelism, mission, faith formation and so much more.

In this sermon, I explore how 1 John demonstrates that love is defined by Jesus’ death on the cross (3:16). The author is contemplating how believers of Jesus Christ could see a person who is in need or suffering and remain apathetic (3:17). When preaching this text, careful attention needs to be taken around the application of this passage. So often, we move toward the action/command of the passage without considering the grace of the passage. This passage affirms over and over that God’s love is relational (3:11, 14, 16-18, 23-24). Therefore, before moving toward living out this command to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and loving one another” (3:23), we would do well to take ourselves out of the center of our understanding of discipleship. Jesus’ act of dying on the cross sits at the center of a faithful understanding of discipleship.

When preaching on this passage, it is essential that the preacher communicate that it is truly God’s love that accomplishes discipleship in the world. If it is God’s love abiding in us and through us that makes discipleship possible, then the same is true for the one who stands in need of the sacrifice we make. God’s love abides in relationship, and as my mother always told me, “Love is a two-way street.” Don’t miss the opportunity to lift up how those in need of love play an important role in discipleship. They complete the “two-way street” where God’s love abides so vividly and clearly in our world today.

Exegesis: 1 John 3:11-24

This passage begins to define love by describing what love is not. The opposite of love, hatred, is born from evil deeds (3:12). John demonstrates that Cain’s murdering Abel shows how acts of hatred are and lead to murderous behavior (3:12, 15). John admonishes his reader to first see that love does not look like hatred, for “All who hate a brother or sister are murderers” (3:15 NRSV).

The text then answers the question: If that is not what love is like, then what does love look like? For John, the answer to this question is simple. The author encourages the reader to look no further than

¹⁵ Mark Allan Powell, [*Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*](#), p. 493

¹⁶ Powell, p. 493

¹⁷ Powell, p. 493



the cross (3:16). Therefore, "Love is said to be expressed in the giving of one's life for the sake of another, and hatred in the exact opposite, the taking of someone else's life."¹⁸

Moving from defining love to seeing love in action, Verse 17 calls the reader to see that this mysterious substance known as love takes shape in the world through acts of generosity, mercy and justice. John questions whether God's love abides in a person whose *σπλάγχνον* (intestines, heart) are "shut" off from the suffering of others.¹⁹ In other words, a person who has seen another's suffering and was unaffected by it. John did not expect readers to reduce Jesus' love on the cross only for those able to give tangible gifts. Without this nuance, the one with something to give is the only one in whom God's love abides. When, in fact, John's overarching point thus far is around seeing how God's love revealed in Jesus' death enables us to "love one another" and that through loving one another "eternal life" abides (3:14-15).

Bishop Kenneth Carder illuminates this important distinction through demonstrating how people with dementia participate in discipleship. He says, "The essence of Christian discipleship is this: participation in the giving and receiving of love."²⁰ He goes on to say, "Sometimes we take the 'lead'...other times we are dependent."²¹ Bishop Carder is pointing out that discipleship does not and cannot only look like the act of giving love. The whole premise of the human ability to love at all stems from the truth that we know love because of Jesus' love (3:16). Discipleship, then, includes those who receive the acts of love, and an even more profound truth is that those who receive the love are playing an equal part in living out John's (and Jesus') command to love one another. Seeing the recipient as also fulfilling their role as a disciple leads to more faithful ministry that sees the other as giving the gift of an opportunity to serve. The one receiving the act of love returns love back to the original giver in forms of gratitude and by giving the best gift of all, relationship.

John wants to be sure that his reader hears him saying that love is more than "words or speech," but that it is "truth and action" (3:18). Without giving the reader more specifics than Verse 17, John seems to move toward settling an internal debate within the life of a disciple of Jesus. Through this action of loving others, John says, we "will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts" (3:19-20). For John, the action of love, which is of the very nature of God (4:8, 6), reassures the heart of God's goodness even when the heart convinces the disciple that God is eternally frustrated with the believer. No, through the love that is experienced through Jesus' self-giving act on the cross (3:16) and the love that is shared as a result of Jesus' love in community (3:14, 17), God's people have reassurance that God's love is greater than any condemnation the heart can convince the believer they deserve (3:19-20).

In this context, verses 21 and 22 assure the believer that God's love has freed them to have an unconditional relationship with God. If God's love is greater than any condemnation the heart deems appropriate, then how can one not "have boldness before God" (3:21). And even more, that God will give disciples "whatever we ask" through the favor God finds through this mutual sharing of love between the disciple, God and each other (3:22). The easy pushback to make at this point is the question of why God does not give the exact thing for which one asks God. In the context of the

¹⁸ David Rensberger, [*Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: 1, 2 & 3 John*](#), p. 97.

¹⁹ Rensberger, p. 101.

²⁰ Kenneth L. Carder, [*Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia through a Spiritual Lens*](#), p. 92.

²¹ Carder, p. 93



passage, “whatever we ask” is in relation to John’s theme of abiding.²² Rensberger notes, “To live in fidelity to and dependence on God’s will... is to ‘abide in God,’ and so to live with no other source of security in the world, to enter fully into the risk of turning away from material and social safety to rely on God alone.”²³ Receiving “whatever we ask” from God looks like the promise of God’s abiding presence no matter anything that would suggest the opposite. God is and will abide in those who share in the love offered by Jesus and the love shared in community. All the more reason to “have boldness before God” (3:21) and to have assurance that God will give his people “whatever we ask” (3:22) in relation to God’s abiding presence.

John does not move off this point quite yet as he reinforces the commandment to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another” (3:23). Again, the passage as whole seeks to address this theme of love by discussing love’s definition (3:11-16), love’s origin (3:16), love visible in the world (3:17-18), and love’s power (3:19-22). John calls his reader to see that living out this commandment makes eternal life a present reality (3:15) as God abides totally and completely by the “Spirit he has given us” (3:24). Through belief in the name of Jesus and sharing Christ’s love with others, God’s abiding presence moves restoring, reconciling, and creating strong bonds of relationship with God and others.

Sermon Outline

1. Intro: How I met my wife – online; initial anxiety.
 - a. Adoption of our slogan: “If you have to say it, then it probably isn’t true.”
 - b. The slogan reminds us to communicate with action above words.
2. John contemplates how God’s love abides when it isn’t shared.
 - a. John’s wondering is located in what God’s love looks like in the world.
 - b. John explains that God’s love is defined by Jesus’ death on the cross.
 - c. If this is the case, God’s love must look like the giving of oneself.
 - d. How does God’s love abide where suffering and needs are pervasive?
3. Before answering the question, we ground the question in the life of Jesus.
 - a. The motivation in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was always relational.
 - i. Jesus’ life was devoted to the sick and marginalized.
 - ii. Jesus’ death defines God’s love for creation.
 - iii. Jesus’ resurrection provides the way for eternal life with God.

²² Rensberger, p. 108.

²³ Rensberger, p. 108.



- b. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is God demonstrating love in action.
- c. Therefore, this command to love should have the same goal of relationship.
- 4. Ministry with someone with dementia and reflection.
 - a. Offering care for someone with dementia by entering their reality.
 - b. God's love abided through her even as her cognitive abilities declined.
 - c. This woman shared of herself with that doll and in turn shared love with me.
 - d. I was there to give her care and learned from her how love pours out in both the one giving something and the one receiving something.
 - e. This is what John envisions God's love accomplishing in the world.
- 5. It makes sense that the disciple's heart would be stirred when a need arises.
 - a. God is stirred by the needs and suffering of God's people.
 - b. In this, we join John in wondering how God's love is being shared with others.
 - c. Likewise, we wonder where growth is possible in sharing God's love.
- 6. Conclusion: Actions are a great way of showing love.
 - a. Before we move to action, we sit and share with the person we seek to help.
 - b. God's abiding love always happens in relationship.
 - c. Love must always include more than just words.
 - d. Rather, we show God's love in action, just like Jesus on the cross.
 - e. The world will come to know God's love action that leads to relationship.

The Sermon: "The Way of Love"

"If you have to say it, then it probably isn't true."

A funny story of how my wife and I met begins like many young couples' stories do now. I met my wife online through social media. After spending several days getting to know each other via text message, eventually, we scheduled our first "real date." This would be the first time either of us was seeing the other person live and in color, so naturally some feelings of nervousness accompanied this date. The usual wondering when meeting someone you have never seen in person includes the question, "What if they don't like me once they truly meet me?" Perhaps, one is afraid they won't come off as charming or endearing as they did online. And then, the most ominous of all questions, "What if they aren't the person that they told me they were?" In plain terms, "Is this going to be the actual person I believed I was talking to, or will it be an imposter?"

Before this first date, I had obviously done my due diligence of making sure I was talking to exactly the person I believed I was talking to, so I left for the date with at least that question answered. I was



confident that at the bare minimum, this was going to be a “real date” with the person I had been talking with. However, right before we met, my now-wife texted me, “I promise I’m a real person, and not a criminal.” I got that message and was concerned! I quickly responded to her by saying, “Well, if you have to say it, then it probably isn’t true!” She was obviously just trying to make me feel more comfortable meeting an almost complete stranger, nevertheless, the statement, “If you have to say it, then it probably isn’t true” became our marriage’s slogan.

We adopted this as our slogan because it is important that we actively convince one another of our love for each other not just in “word and speech” but in “truth and action” (1 John 3:18 NRSV). We laughed all throughout that first date because we thought it was the funniest thing that had ever happened. I called her before the date in a panic that something fishy was about to happen, and we spent the whole date joking about this moment of miscommunication. From then on, we often say to each other in different situations, “If you have to say it, then it probably isn’t true.” In other words, when those situations arise, my wife or I want to be convinced by the other’s actions, not just their words. Don’t tell me, show me.

In the passage from 1 John, this exploration of love is located in what love looks like in relationship to God and each other. John wants readers to see and know that God’s love abides and moves within a disciple of Jesus Christ in such a way that John wonders how a disciple could ever close themselves off to the suffering of others (3:17). John says, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (3:17)

John’s question isn’t focused as much on the disciple as it is an earnest wondering of how God’s love looks in the world. For John, God’s love takes full shape, meaning and purpose in Jesus’ willingly dying on the cross (3:16). Certainly, then, if God’s love abides in this world, it has to look like similar offerings of ourselves for the sake of others.

John is saying something more than simply that God’s love inspires acts of generosity, love, mercy and justice. John is saying that God’s love stimulates those things (generosity, love, mercy and justice) in the lives of the ones who are in relationship with God. And this is the case because that is what has been revealed in the cross. It is this that makes John wonder how God’s love can abide when the pain and suffering of others goes ignored or shrugged off.

It is easy to hear this and think that God’s desire for disciples of Jesus is to simply do good in the world by providing for the needs of others. But, like all questions of faith, it is necessary to look toward the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to see how God calls us to live in relationship with God and one another. Jesus’ life and ministry were devoted to healing the sick, restoring relationships for those who had been marginalized, and calling powerful people to account based on God’s law. It is this that led to Jesus’ crucifixion, where Jesus demonstrated that the suffering of others and the love God has for God’s creation is worth dying for. When disciples of Jesus look into the empty tomb, it is clear that God’s total commitment to restoring relationships between God and the world will not be thwarted by anything, not even death. In Jesus’ resurrection, we see that God doesn’t only love us in “word and speech” but in “truth and action” (3:18). Jesus’ resurrection reveals that God loves us more than to just give us something to meet a need, but to eternally abide in the life of a disciple today, tomorrow and forever.



When John writes, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (3:17), John isn’t envisioning other disciples simply to meet the needs of others for the sake of meeting needs. Rather, like the cross and resurrection, John envisions God’s love creating community and restoring broken relationships. Like God’s love revealed in the cross, love is defined as more than a simple act of kindness. Love seeks the good of the other by giving of ourselves to them. The gift of providing for the need but also ourselves in relationship to others. All of this is because God’s abiding love sweeps us up in authentic relationship with God, the community of faith, and those we encounter.

When I was in seminary, I served as a chaplain-intern at a senior care facility through the program known as CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). I was assigned to the skilled care unit, which is for people who need 24-hour advanced care. Many of the residents in my unit had all kinds of different reasons they needed 24-hour care, but a significant number of them had late stages of dementia. When I began to do this work of visiting with people who had dementia, I struggled with knowing what to do during these visits. Like a good seminarian and Christian, when I saw their moments of confusion, isolation and sometimes despair, I wanted to know what to do to fix it. That’s what we are supposed to do, right? Fix people’s problems. Meet people’s needs.

It is important to know that when a person with dementia is in distress over something they perceive is happening, it cannot be fixed by telling them “that isn’t actually happening.” For example, a person with dementia might say, “Someone in my family needs help! They just got in a car wreck!” Their family might be in the lobby getting checked in, but saying to that person, “No, they weren’t in a wreck, they’re fine,” isn’t going to help that person at all. In their reality, their family member is in grave danger. Imagine for yourself that someone you love was just in a bad car accident and someone told you, “That didn’t just happen, they are fine.” How would you react?

Throughout the internship, the instructor of the program and the staff chaplains were teaching us to provide care for our residents with dementia – not by trying to fix their problem through rational explanations of reality but to enter into the reality of the resident. If a resident with dementia said, “My mother was just in a car wreck,” we learned to respond as we would to anyone whose mother was just in a car wreck. I hope that makes sense to you.

One day, I was visiting with a resident who had late-stage dementia. She held a toy doll in her arms. It’s very common for people with late-stage dementia to be given a doll to hold and care for. As I walked by her, she said, “Look how pretty my baby’s eyes are. She gets them from me.” I sat with her for a long time and asked her some basic questions, such as “How old is she?” and “What’s her name?” This woman loved that doll. To the doll, she was giving of herself by brushing its hair, holding it in her arms, and giving it tight hugs. She was overjoyed to share her love with this doll who, in her eyes, was the most beautiful baby she had ever seen. She took that doll with her everywhere she went. She introduced everyone to this baby whom she loved so much. God’s love abided in her, and it was visible in the way she cared for this baby with unwavering devotion.

When I think about John’s words about loving others through giving of oneself, I can’t help but remember the people I had the opportunity to serve during that internship. I think about that woman often, and I think about her daughter who told me, “She was the best mom to us. She loved everyone



she met.” Even when our cognitive abilities decline, God’s love is still visible and able to be shared for those who need to be cared for, even if it is a baby doll.

One of the most significant truths that we can see in this passage is that God’s love abides in the giving and receiving of God’s love. It is 100 percent the case that this woman gave me the same, if not more, love than I offered her as her chaplain. By all accounts, I was the one with something to give her, but she gave back to me a relationship that I still consider one of the most important ones in my life. That’s the joy of God’s love and that’s what John envisions God’s love to accomplish. It involves the giving of oneself for the sake of another and that relationships be formed, restored and reconciled as both the one who gives and the one who receives shares in the abundance of God’s presence that abides throughout.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we can expect God’s love to cause our hearts to become stirred when a need arises in the life of someone we encounter. And that is because God is stirred by the suffering and pain of those he has created. When that happens, know that God is with us as we seek to share the love that God has for us. And to know that the person we encounter is loved by God and always has an equal measure to return – whether that be friendship, relationship or just the blessing to get to serve someone in God’s name.

Our world needs God’s love, and this passage asks us to join John in wondering how God’s love that is so abundant and overflowing would not pour out of all those who profess faith in Christ. Perhaps in that wondering, we might see the ways in which God’s love does pour out through us, as disciples of Jesus Christ. And it might be worth considering where we, as disciples of Jesus, still have room to grow in sharing God’s love.

My wife and I both appreciate when the other says loving things, but other times words aren’t enough. Sometimes, through the difficulties and pain of this life, there are no words that can be spoken at all. It is exactly in those moments when God’s love moves us toward action. It is precisely those moments when we pull up a chair and sit with a woman and her doll while we listen, laugh and give of ourselves, knowing that she is sharing her gift of life with us as well. And in that, God’s love abides. We don’t just fix problems with words. Sometimes it is the case that “if you have to say it, then it probably isn’t true.” Just like Jesus, we are called to do more than tell the world God loves them, but to show them. In that showing, they will come to see that it is true. God, indeed, loves us.

Other Illustrations

- Consider adding a story from your own life around a time when discipleship took on new meaning. Interactions in pastoral care situations may come to mind, but do not break any pastoral confidentiality. Or consider a time when someone offered you God’s love by meeting a need in your life. Sharing how that impacted your life will help others see a more holistic image of helping others.
- Another angle to consider might be highlighting something the church you serve is already doing. Maybe there is a ministry taking place in the congregation that has greatly impacted people in your community. Highlighting those stories can help congregations see how they might already be doing the kind of work that this passage calls the church to do.



- Similarly, there might be a need in your community where the congregation could consider reaching out to show God's love to those who are living without something. Maybe the community has people who are experiencing food insecurity. Explore the community for ways this passage is calling us to reach out in God's love to others.
- Part of my call story includes my home pastor, who encouraged me to participate in leading worship. Consider allowing a person or people to share with the congregation about a ministry they participate in and how that ministry serves others. It is always meaningful and effective when people in the local congregation share in the leading of worship. This sermon is a great opportunity to let others share with the congregation how God has called them to share God's love and how they have experienced God's love offered to them in their time of need.

In my experience, God's calling on my life was more easily heard because my pastor shared the pulpit with me. It's amazing what God can do when we simply invite others to be a part of the work of the church. I came to know God's love through my home church and this pastor who gave me the gift of serving others in worship.

This passage offers countless ways for the preacher to contextualize it to their setting. All it will take is for the preacher to ask themselves, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 John 3:17 NRSV). From there, we will see quickly that God's love does abide in the countless ways God has been at work in our lives as preachers and in the lives of the congregations we serve. Those stories can help congregations see how discipleship is both something that God's love is already moving us to do, and how God's grace is moving us to even more than we presently think possible.

Supplemental Resources

- Video:
 - "[Some People Are Worth Melting For](#)," from the movie "Frozen." Olaf gives a wonderful definition of what love looks like in the world. It is selfless and focused on the good of the other.
 - "[I'll trade you for it](#)," from the movie "The Sandlot." The important thing in this scene is that the kids thought Mr. Mertle was keeping "a beast." Once they hit the main character's stepfather's baseball, autographed by Babe Ruth, over the fence into the forbidden territory of the beast, they finally meet the old man and realize that he is kind and generous; he gives them another baseball autographed by Babe Ruth. At the end of the scene, Mr. Mertle asks the kids to come back every week to talk baseball with him. This starts a relationship between Mr. Mertle and the kids. Once they feared the man and "the beast," but the new relationship gave all of them a fresh start.
 - "[Final Scene](#)" from the movie "Evan Almighty." This scene demonstrates that we can begin big changes by extending small acts of kindness toward others. Discipleship and transforming the world seem like an insurmountable task. When we put our faith in God, we can trust that God can do amazing things with even five loaves and two fish. In other words, an expression of love, no matter how small, is never wasted.



- Traditional Hymns:
 - ["I Love to Tell the Story"](#) (UMH 156)
 - ["Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"](#) (UMH 381)
 - ["Where He Leads Me"](#) (UMH 338)
 - ["He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought"](#) (UMH 128)
 - ["Lift High the Cross"](#) (UMH 159)
 - ["Abide with Me"](#) (UMH 700)
 - ["We Would See Jesus"](#) (UMH 256)
- Contemporary Music:
 - ["God is Love,"](#) by Chris Renzema.
 - ["Reckless Love,"](#) by Cory Asbury.
 - ["God So Loved,"](#) by We The Kingdom.
 - ["Great Are You Lord,"](#) by All Sons and Daughters.
 - ["How He Loves,"](#) by John Mark McMillan.
 - ["You Bled,"](#) by Rend Collective.
 - ["Wake Up,"](#) by All Sons and Daughters.
 - ["Turning Over Tables,"](#) by The Brilliance.

Further Reading

- ["Ministry with the Forgotten: Dementia through a Spiritual Lens,"](#) by Kenneth L. Carder.
- ["Sacra Pagina: 1, 2 and 3 John"](#) (Volume 18), by John Painter, edited by Daniel J. Harrington, pp. 232-252.
- ["Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary and Theological Survey,"](#) by Mark Allan Powell, pp. 493-507 (The Johannine Letters: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John).
- ["Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: 1, 2 & 3 John,"](#) by David Rensberger, pp. 96-109.



Sermon 7: Called to Account

Writer: Rev. Dr. Sheila Elliott Hodge

Scripture: Isaiah 10:1-4 | James 2:14-25

Note to the Pastor

First, there is no mistaking the harsh judgment that Isaiah speaks to the religious and political leaders concerning their legal maneuverings against the poor. Mikael Broadway points out that we cannot dismiss the link between leaders and economic oppression, between the powerful and their propensity to use political systems to their advantage, especially in times of crisis.²⁴

Second, our society can be very judgmental, yet we are uncomfortable with being judged and with divine judgment. The task is to help learners re-imagine the role of judgment in the life as faithful disciples. The hope is that all might move beyond fear to faithful action.

Third, highlight our tendency as disciples to not fully engage what scripture says about justice and God's passion for it. Again, Broadway asserts that we need to have a deeper study of justice in order to know God and God's passion for justice better. This study is an opportunity to move the congregation in recognition and response.

Exegesis: Isaiah 10:1-4

In the first four verses of Chapter 10, the prophet Isaiah warned the Southern Kingdom of Judah that they would be judged and suffer the same fate as the Northern Kingdom of Israel because of their behavior toward the poor. This behavior was not just ignoring the plight of the poor, but intentionally and repeatedly creating laws – “iniquitous decrees” – that dispossess the poor. The prophet announced God's judgment because of such injustice.

It is important to note that these four verses in Chapter 10 of Isaiah are the concluding verses of a larger unit that begins in Isaiah 9:8, where the prophet recounts the evil actions that contributed to the demise of the Northern Kingdom. The refrain, “For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still,” is repeated throughout this unit and is the final verse in the pericope. Even after Judah's destruction, God's hand of judgment will still be against them.

As disciples, we should recognize that God's anger at the injustices experienced by God's people is not easily placated. I would strongly suggest that you read the first 12 chapters in order to understand the broader context of these four verses in Chapter 10. How the leaders, both political and religious, those called to represent God, used their power and privilege to pervert justice, rather than to protect and promote it.

They heard the prophet's words, but “they justified their wrongs and continued to believe that they did not need to change their minds or their ways. They refused to know the Lord better and to comprehend God's love for justice.”²⁵

²⁴ Mikael Broadway, “[Grinding the Face of the Poor](#),” *Review & Expositor*, (April 21, 2019), p. 56.

²⁵ Broadway, pp. 54, 55.



Let us determine to know the Lord better and to comprehend just how much God loves justice. This study is an opportunity to fully engage what scriptures say about justice, to let the prophetic words of woe and judgment penetrate our privilege and prompt us to actively promote justice for the vulnerable among us.

Sermon Outline

Key verse: “What will you do on the day of reckoning...” (Isaiah 10:3)

Introduction

1. We are uncomfortable with the idea of judgment, especially divine judgment.
 - a. How are we socialized to think about judgment: biblical examples.
 - b. A more expansive view of judgment – how and why can we learn to love God’s judgment.
2. God loves justice.
 - a. Judah is called to account for the unjust legal system.
 - b. Religious and political leaders, who are called to serve and to fulfill covenant, refuse to repent.
3. Woe to us – a harsh message with the hope of a repentant response.
 - a. We are already judged – naming some present-day injustices.
 - b. Say their names.
 - c. Mandatory sentencing guidelines.
 - d. Money bail system.
 - e. Children living in poverty
4. Conclusion

The Sermon: “Called to Account”

I believe that we, as a people, are generally uncomfortable with the idea of being judged. I think we are OK, confident even, in our judgment of those who do not measure up to our moral, ethical or personal standards, even though we know that the Scripture warns us to not judge others lest we be judged. (Matthew 7:1-2) But we do it anyway.

Given the popularity of reality television courtroom shows and the star power of Judge Judy and Judge Joe Brown, it is apparent that we enjoy being entertained by the shortcomings of others – how they have failed, the foolish decisions they have made, what they have done wrong, and what judgment they receive. But what we are willing to accept for and do to others, we do not readily apply to ourselves and especially to our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.



And yet, scripture after scripture speaks of the reality of divine judgment. (Romans 2:5-13, 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, Matthew 25:14-28; 31-46) We affirm the reality of divine judgment, as uncomfortable as it may be, as part of the creed that we recite regularly, “he shall come to judge the living and the dead.” Are we living in recognition and preparation for “that day,” that day of reckoning?

I grew up in another faith tradition. Through it, I received an awareness that there will come a day of judgment, a day of reckoning, when we will have to give an account, and that knowledge always worried me. I saw this future day as a day of God’s wrath, a day to be feared. It would be a day when we are called to account for our actions or our inaction as it relates to our faithfulness as disciples.

But now, when I think of the goodness and graciousness of God, I have a more expansive view of that day of reckoning and what it means as a disciple to be called to account and to accountability. I have come to understand that God’s judgment is as much about our present as it is the future. It is for the sake of others and their lives, especially the vulnerable among us, as it is for mine.

Our judgment isn’t just someday; it is also today. Here and now, there is judgment on the ways in which we have failed to live out our identity and purpose as God’s people, the ways we in the church conform to this world and compromise God’s call to live, love and act justly.

Morgan Guyton, in his article “Learning to Love God’s Judgment,” asks, “What if God judges out of a desire for us to be reconciled with each other and with God?”²⁶ What if judgment is a pathway to peace and justice? What if it is also a means to our repentance and responsiveness where we have failed? Then judgment isn’t just to be feared but faced, not just worried about, but welcomed.

Will Willimon states that “we serve a God who loves us enough to not leave us to our own devices, a God who comes to us (in Jesus) and through the prophets to speak truth to us (so that) we might stand before the mirror of truth,” today and in eternity.²⁷

Part of the truth that we stand in judgment is God’s demand, God’s expectation for justice. Surely, by now, we know something of God’s concern for the least, the vulnerable, the marginalized and those who are on the periphery of power and privilege.

I imagine the good news that the poor need to hear must be troubling to the rich. To proclaim that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, is to invite others to imagine a new world order that reflects God’s priorities. Challenging a religious system that impoverishes a widow of all that she has is an indictment on those whom God has called to lead. The truth of God’s love for justice was spoken and lived by Jesus toward all – but especially those on the margins.

And it was this truth that the prophets shared in their day and spoke God’s judgment on the political and religious leaders who trampled upon the poor, who dispossessed the widow, who mistreated the foreigner, who neglected the needs of the orphan, and who ignored God’s passion for justice.

Isaiah called the leaders of Judah to account for their unjust laws and announced that God’s judgment was upon them. Woe to those who oppress the poor; woe to those who pervert justice; woe to those

²⁶ Morgan Guyton, “[Learning to Love God’s Judgment](#)”, *Ministry Matters*, August 15, 2011.

²⁷ William H. Willimon, “[Grace as Judgment](#)”, *Ministry Matters*, November 15, 2020.



whose worship does not witness to God's love for justice; woe to those who use their privilege and position to protect and enrich themselves at the expense of others.

The promise to those who legislate evil and make laws that make victims, who use their power to dispossess the poor, not just of their property, but their dignity as well, was and is judgment. (Isaiah 10:1 MSG) Judah refused to learn from Israel's experience, refused to recognize the depth of God's concern for justice. God will not be mocked. So their day of reckoning was also coming, a day of punishment just as there had been a day of reckoning for the Northern Kingdom.

I cannot help but believe that we have already been judged, that our day has come, and now is the time to repent, learn, respond and live into the depth of God's love for justice, God's concern for the poor and the vulnerable, and to address the unjust economic and political systems that oppress them.

We have already been judged. Say their names: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Ahmaud Arbery, Elijah McClain, Tony McDade, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, George Floyd, the Emanuel Nine – and these are just the names we know.

We are already judged by the laws of mandatory sentencing and a system of mass incarceration that imprisons ethnic minorities at a higher rate.²⁸ We are already judged by a money bail system that disadvantages the poor. We are already judged when there are 11.9 million children living in poverty and 5 million living in extreme poverty.²⁹

We are already judged, and this is our day of reckoning. What will we do? We have been called to account by God's Word and by God's passion for justice. We have been called to account by the injustices we have seen. We have been called to account by our Methodist heritage, which invites us not just to do no harm, but to do all the good we can. When it comes to justice, are we doing all the good we can?

Let's stand in the truth about our own discipleship. We are more comfortable with acts of mercy and compassion, rather than acts of justice. We can build homes for the poor (and yes, that is a good thing), but not inquire why housing is unaffordable. We can distribute bags of food, but not address the issue of hunger and poverty in America. We can pray for peace, but not actively work for justice. We hold truths to be self-evident, but we tolerate inequality in America.

We are already judged, and this is our day of reckoning. What will we do? Will we pretend that we do not know what God desires? Or will we face and name the injustices that we see, even if we have been its beneficiaries? "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."³⁰ We have who and what we need to face what needs to be changed. It is time to repent, stand in God's truth, and pursue justice.

²⁸ Ashley Nellis, "[The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons](#)", June 14, 2016.

²⁹ Children's Defense Fund, "[The State of America's Children 2020: An Urgent and Preventable Crisis](#)".

³⁰ James Baldwin, "[As Much Truth as One Can Bear](#)," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1962.



Supplemental Resources

- Videos:
 - "[Letter to the Free](#)," by Common, from the soundtrack to the movie "13th".
 - "[I Wish I Knew \(How It Would Feel to Be Free\)](#)," by Nina Simone, a classic jazz song of lament.
 - "[Rose Petals](#)," by Terrell Wilson.
 - "[It is Enough](#)," by R. DeAndre Johnson.
 - "[3½ Minutes, 10 Bullets](#)," an HBO documentary concerning the shooting death of Jordan Davis, an unarmed Black 17-year-old.
 - "[True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality](#)," an HBO documentary about the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and his struggle to create greater fairness in the U.S. judicial system.
 - "[Just Mercy](#)," based on the book by Bryan Stevenson.
 - "[Time: The Kalief Browder Story](#)," a mini-series about a Bronx high school student who was imprisoned for three years – two of them in solitary confinement on Rikers Island – without being convicted of a crime.
 - "[Teach Us All](#)," a documentary that examines educational inequality through the use of case studies in Little Rock, New York City and Los Angeles.
 - "[When They See Us](#)," a Netflix series that explores the lives and families of the five Black suspects who were falsely accused and prosecuted on charges related to the rape and assault of a white woman in Central Park.
- Poem:
 - "[I Dream A World](#)," a Langston Hughes poem that speaks of a deep yearning for justice and equality.

Further Reading

- "[Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice](#)," by Eric Mason.
- "[Just Us or Justice? Moving Toward a Pan-Methodist Theology](#)," by F. Douglas Powe Jr.



Sermon 8: Disciples Care for Others

Writer: Bishop L. Jonathan Holston
Scripture: Micah 6:1-8 | James 1:19-27

Note to the Pastor

As you prepare to preach this sermon, I invite you to fight the temptation to see yourself as Micah, but rather to see yourself in the role of the Israelites. This is an important starting point, because it allows us to accept that Micah's pronouncements are directed toward us, as well. Just as the prophet indicts the civic, cultural and political authorities, Micah calls out the religious authorities. Instead of being willing to point the accusatory finger at the complicity of others, this country, suburban prophet requires us to consider our own behavior.

That's the authenticity we can bring to the preaching moment. When we humble ourselves in this manner, we understand how the verses of Micah 6:1-7 provide the context for Micah 6:8. This passage can then seem like a challenge that calls us all to do the hard work of self-reflection, confession and repentance. This process gives us a chance to recognize God's true character that calls us to justice, mercy and humility – the qualities within reach of every human soul.

Exegesis: Micah 6:6-8

The scripture text of Micah 6:6-8 shares two questions that give insight and understanding to the relationship between God and God's people. These two questions are, "How shall I come before God?" and, "What does God require of me?" In order to adequately consider each question, one must understand the context in which the questions are asked and the responsibility of God's prophet in the conversation.

It is suggested that the prophets of Israel were either criticizing (afflicting the comfortable) or energizing (comforting the afflicted) God's people. The prophet's role was one of accountability. This included the tasks of speaking truth to power, disturbing the status quo, questioning the order of things, and advocating for a new way of living. This sense of accountability permeated every dimension of an individual's life or the life of the community. It was a holistic reckoning that was personal, social, spiritual, economic and political, at best. The prophet was also seen as one who can encourage with hope and power by affirming one's understanding of self and inspiring others toward God's preferred future.

As Micah arrives on the scene, we understand that he hears the call of God prophesied during the reign of kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. This was a time when Assyria and Babylon were the aggressors in Israel's and Judah's midst. We know that Isaiah, Amos and Hosea were contemporaries of Micah, as well. Micah is the younger prophet from the small town of Moresheth-Gath, which is about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem. He is seen as the country prophet and was felt to be the voice of the poor farm workers and the common everyday people suffering at the hands of the powerful. Therefore, he sets his sights on the civic and cultural elite, as well as the religious leaders.

To bring further clarity to the passage, we should consider Micah 6:1-5, which identifies God's confusion and displeasure with a complaining group of people. God lodges a charge against Israel, and



the mountains are the jury. In other parts of Micah's prophecy, he targets the civic and cultural leaders for their economic exploitation and political oppression of the poor in their midst. He also criticizes the religious leaders for their validation of this behavior and their obvious policing of the people. The concern is that the relationship between God and Israel is strained and, possibly, in need of repair, hence the lawsuit language used in verses 1–5.

Through the prophet, God reminds the people of God's goodness to them, namely, the exodus from Egypt; the gift of leaders, especially Moses, Aaron and Miriam; deliverance from the Moabite King Balak; and safe passage into the Promised Land (from one side, Shittim, to the promised side, Gilgal).

The people respond in what could be felt as a condescending tone, asking, "With what shall I come before you, God?" The responses are exaggerations at best and unpleasing at the worst: thousands of sheep, rivers of oil, the death of the firstborn. Micah declares in Verse 8 that Israel knows what is required of them: to act justly (or do justice), love mercy and walk humbly with God.

To act justly, or do justice, is to consider the Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*. The word itself speaks to bringing people into a right relationship with God and one another.

To love mercy is to consider the Hebrew word for mercy, *hesed*. It is to express loyalty and devotion to the covenant. It is the process of going out of your way to show respect and kindness, to reciprocate that kindness, and to pay it forward as well.

The third requirement is to walk humbly with your God. This is giving up one's selfish pretenses, practicing the "power of proximity" and getting closer to what God values.

Sermon Outline

As I consider this sermon, I believe the reality of doing what God wants most of all requires an understanding of the concept of Christian discipleship that is seen, felt and understood.

1. In my introduction, I begin with a narrative around being understood. It is a deep desire by all of us that we are being heard, which hopefully allows us to reciprocate that behavior to others. To acknowledge the desire of understanding builds the foundation of discipleship through authentic relationships. Especially when a part of listening involves the possibility that the largest room in life is the "room for improvement."
2. In the second section, the prophet Micah is introduced by the timeframe in which he gives leadership. This is done by a listing of the leaders in that era, as well as his contemporaries in ministry. The role of the prophet is introduced as the necessary community agitator and reconciler. Also, the context of Micah's community is important. To recognize those who create havoc in community life is as important as the response. As a prophet, Micah identifies the broken relationship with God that is felt by the least, lost and left behind.
3. In the third section, Micah is speaking on God's behalf and reminding the people of God's caring actions and the ultimate question of what God requires of us. What God requires are qualities within reach of all of God's people. Stories are shared that seek for further understanding of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. This type of discipleship is an active expression of faith.



The Sermon: “Disciples Care for Others”

It has been said that “when spoken together at just the right moment, there are two words that have amazing, life-changing power.” These two words possess the capacity to breathe into us new life, to lift burdens, and to calm fears, as well as to inspire hope. Surely words like “I believe,” “I do,” or similar phrases would fit the bill, so to speak.

But the words to which I refer are simply these: “I understand.”

Think about it in this way. What happens when we are in a serious disagreement with our spouse, parents, siblings, friends, classmates, teammates, relatives, or just fill in the blank?

We probably find ourselves rehearsing speeches in our heads while we work, drive, pump gas, study, or lay in bed late at night. We play out different scenarios in our minds and think of clever things we plan to say the next time the issue is discussed.

I believe that one of the reasons we do this is because we want people to understand our point of view. It’s difficult to accept that people with whom we share a conflict do not understand our position. In fact, we are more determined to enlighten them, even if it’s the last thing we do!

So, give this a thought: What happens when we feel criticized? Don’t we rant and rave about all the things our critics don’t understand? They don’t understand the pressure we are under, the decisions we have to make, or the journey our lives have taken. Our critics don’t understand when we are lonely, depressed, or possibly grieving, and someone tells us to just “snap out of it.”

Our instincts tell us to mark that person or persons as insensitive and having no understanding of what we are experiencing. I believe that some of the most frustrating times in life come when we desperately need understanding and can’t find it.

Marie Curie said it this way: “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we fear less.”

That is why these two words – “I understand” – are so powerful. When we find ourselves in the tough situations of life, and we will, these two words provide a lifeline, a sigh of relief, and a gracious hope.

In this Old Testament text, the word of God comes to Micah in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah – all kings of Judah. As a younger contemporary of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea, Micah takes up the inevitable mantra of prophet, in which criticizing and energizing God’s people is the norm. The prophet is God’s spokesperson. The prophet “afflicts the comfortable by speaking truth to power, disturbing the status quo, and advocating for a new way of living.” The prophet also energizes God’s people by “comforting the afflicted.” The prophet generates hope and affirms God’s people in who and whose they are, as well as helping create God’s preferred future.

Micah was no different. This country prophet from the small village of Moresheth-Gath was repping for the poor farm workers who were suffering at the hands of the powerful landlords. As God’s mouthpiece, Micah knew that when we witness injustice, anger is understandable. When we witness injustice, protest is appropriate. When we witness injustice, action is vital, because we recognize that hopelessness is the enemy of justice.



Micah afflicts the comfortable civic and cultural elite who choose to perpetrate the hopelessness of economic exploitation and political oppression against the least, last and left behind. This country, suburban prophet afflicts the spiritual hypocrisy of the religious leaders as they “mass-market their teaching, preach for high fees, all the while posturing and pretending dependence on God.” (Micah 3:11, MSG)

Micah was charged with confronting the smug, self-righteous and self-satisfied nature of God’s people. The biblical writers remind us time and time again that God’s word never comes to us in a vacuum. It is set against the backdrops of world events as a promise to God’s people. It is the covenant relationship God has with his people. God loves unconditionally, even when we approach with an attitude of indignation.

Amidst the Assyrian and Babylonian threat, which is consistent and constant, Micah speaks a word of warning. Even as God’s beloved community fell into ways of sin and selfishness that were disrespectful to God, Micah speaks a word of remembrance.

It is through Micah that God reminds the people of their miraculous heritage:

- I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the hand of slavery.
- I sent you Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead you.
- I delivered you from the Moabite king, Balak, and
- I made sure you made it into the Promised Land from Shittim to Gilgal.

It is personal with God.

With a tinge of ungratefulness, they ask in colloquial terms, “What more do you want from us, God? Is it thousands of sheep? Is it rivers of oil? Is it the death of our first-born? With what shall we come before you, O God?”

What I have come to know is that confession and repentance is hard and painful work. No one ever feels that they have wronged anyone or done anything that needs an apology until it is brought to their attention. Yet, repentance goes beyond confession. To truly repent demands a life changed from the inside out. It asks us to make a 180-degree turn with a resolve to choose God’s way rather than our own. It’s not a child’s ploy to avoid punishment. That action will not bring about serious change. That choice only allows us to continue fooling ourselves and remain in denial. Changing bad habits in our attitudes and behavior is hard work.

Micah understood the people’s hearts were far from God. They were suffering from a broken relationship with God.

When traveling to South Africa and Zimbabwe, I had an opportunity to visit the Mandela home in Soweto. In the small backyard area, I noticed a plaque on the wall that shared this quote from Nelson Mandela: “In judging our progress as individuals, we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one’s social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education... But internal factors may be more crucial in one’s development as a human being: humility, purity, generosity, absence of



vanity, readiness to serve your fellow man – qualities within reach of every human soul.” (from a letter to Winnie Mandela; also used as epigraph in “Conversations with Myself,” by Nelson Mandela.)

As Micah answers the question, “What does the Lord require?” I believe God has summed up more succinctly the “qualities within reach of every human soul.”

God is saying to do these three things: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Micah’s words are simple and eternal. What God required of the people in the days of Micah’s ministry is also good for those of us hearing the words today.

First, to do justice. The Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*. Justice involves bringing people into a right relationship with God and one another. These are the relationships that produce righteous lives. Micah and his contemporaries see justice as integral in the lives of the faithful. Amos reminds us to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Moses tells us that “justice and only justice, you shall pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20).

But to do justice requires a change of heart. I turn again to Nelson Mandela, who was finally released from a South African prison in 1990 after 27 years in prison. Mandela shared these words upon his release on February 11, 1990, “As I walked out of the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

Micah said with clarity, “What does the Lord require of you?” Do justice.

Second: to love mercy. The Hebrew word associated with mercy is *hesed*. The word itself has a variety of meanings. It is compassion, kindness, gentleness and faithfulness, to name a few. It is a word that involves action, loyalty and devotion to God. To love mercy is to have a change in one’s lifestyle. It’s a relationship that implies a kindness that is reciprocated by the individuals in the midst of community.

I am reminded of a story shared with me by a friend of mine. He and his family took a vacation to Washington, D.C. One morning, as his family was eating breakfast, a man who identified himself as homeless approached the family. My friend said that he purposely tried not to make eye contact. He noticed another man dressed for the workday purchasing breakfast. The man who identified himself as homeless approached this other man. The individual buying breakfast motioned for him to take a seat. He proceeded to separate the take-out box to form two plates. This man divided his one breakfast into two plates and gave one to this homeless man. My friend observed this “random act of kindness” and remembered his own unwillingness to help, then he said about this homeless guy, “I could almost see the scars in his hands.”

Micah asks with clarity, “What does the Lord require of you?” Love mercy.

Finally, we must walk humbly with our God. To walk is the opposite of running. To be humble is not to be preoccupied with what you need, but instead responding to the needs of others. It is to know that your personal relationship with God is believing God is always with you.

Bryan Stevenson, the author of “Just Mercy” and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, shares the term “the power of proximity.” It is building a relationship by drawing closer to God and paying attention to others. It’s being willing to sacrifice yourself for those on the margins.



These words of the hymn say it best, “When we walk with the Lord, in the light of his word, what a glory he shares on our way. While we do his goodwill, he abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey.”

Micah asks and answers with clarity, “What does the Lord require of you?” “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Other Illustrations

- I believe that there is such a desire for perfection that it has created a propensity to be “people pleasers.” Recently, I found a quote from Herbert Bayard Swope: “I can’t give you a formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: Try to please everybody all the time.” In Micah 6:8, the question is asked and answered for all of us “people pleasers” with the scars of life. Simply, “What does the Lord require of you?” The answer: “to act justly, and to love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” Without exception, there is a story behind every scar. They tell the story of our lives.
- The late Eugene Peterson’s interpretation of Micah 6:8 in The Message version is recorded in this way: “Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal and love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.” A great beginning to this way of living is by attending to the general rules of our United Methodist Church in doing no harm, doing good, and attending to the ordinances of God. These simple “ordinances” include regular attendance in worship, Bible study, prayer, communion, Christian conferencing and giving of our time, talents, gifts and service, as well as being a witness in our community and beyond.

Supplemental Resources

- Video/Audio:
 - “[Just Mercy](#),” a movie that highlights several real-life cases of men wrongly sentenced to death and raises wider questions about the justice system, mass incarceration and excessive punishment. While the movie can be difficult to watch at times, the biblical themes of mercy, grace and redemption drive this true story and are reflected in Bryan Stevenson’s dedication to Micah 6:8. This reminds us to get closer to people who have been excluded, oppressed or marginalized.
 - “[Order My Steps](#),” performed by the Women of Worship choir of the Gospel Music Workshop of America. There is humility in calling on God to direct our steps according to what God sees fit instead of going our own way.
 - “[Generous Justice](#),” a YouTube video in which pastor and theologian Timothy Keller discusses his book of the same name.



- Traditional Hymns:
 - “[Jesu, Jesu](#)” (UMH 432) suggests that relationships among all people should be as equals. It carries forth the theme of justice.
 - “[Trust and Obey](#)” (UMH 467) is concerned with the rewards of trusting in God’s word and obeying God’s will. Even when the way is unsure, I will trust and I am going to obey.
 - “[I Want Jesus to Walk with Me](#)” (UMH 521) is a traditional African-American spiritual that reminds us that, no matter the situation, we can find refuge with the Lord. The picture reference of walking with the Lord hand-in-hand is a personal testimony.

Further Reading

- “[The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Vol. 20](#),” by Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey.
- “[Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A](#),” edited by Walter Brueggemann, et al.
- “[Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living](#),” by Reuben P. Job.
- “[Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts](#),” edited by Stephen D. Renn.
- “[Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption](#),” by Bryan Stevenson.
- “[Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just](#),” by Timothy Keller.





This “Come, Follow Me: Disciples Love and Care for Others” Sermon Series was developed and written by a team from the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

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The contributors offer many different gifts and they come from different traditions. Rather than editing their work to fit a common style (as is done with curriculum resources written by multiple authors), the editors retained their different writing styles as a witness to their different experiences and understandings.

We extend our appreciation to all involved for their work.

Both the sermon series and the adult discussion guide – as well as previous “Come, Follow Me” series – can be downloaded at

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