

# Living as Disciples Worship Planning Series

## Season After Pentecost 2019, Year C

Living as Disciples Worship Series: WEEK 1  
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – July 14, 2019

### Calendar Notes:

July  
July 4 [Independence Day \(USA\)](#)

August  
All Month [Back to School](#)  
August 6 [Hiroshima/Nagasaki Memorial](#)

### Planning for this Series:

The Old Testament readings during this time are in Amos and Hosea. A common theme for these weeks, and indeed the two following from Isaiah, may be “When God Speaks Judgment.” The weekly themes may be “A Plumb Line for Leaders,” “Righteousness and Justice for People,” “When Pity Is Exhausted,” and “Judgment for Restoration.”

The Epistle readings are from Colossians. The series theme is “Our Life in Christ.” The weekly themes may be “How We Grow in Christ,” “Christ in Y’all, the Hope of Glory,” “The All-Sufficiency of Christ to Save Us,” “Out with the Old, On with the New.”

The Gospel readings from Luke continue to follow Jesus as he disciples his disciples. The series theme is “Loving God and Neighbor.” The weekly themes may be, “How to Be a Neighbor,” “Loving by Listening,” “Letting God Love You,” “The Love Never Stops Here.”

Launch your new series well today! With a four-week story arc, the energy profile of the series is likely to be naturally either “ever upward” or “ever deeper.” The Epistle readings could easily be handled in an “ever-upward” direction. The Old Testament readings probably work best with an “ever-deeper” approach. The gospel readings could go either way.

### Commentary

This Sunday marks one of places in the lectionary where the Old Testament and Epistle readings change to new books at the same time, allowing the possibility of a shift in focus to another of the three tracks of readings throughout Ordinary Time. In the Old Testament, we shift from the era of Elijah/Elisha to the minor prophets, beginning with Amos, and so from a period and vocation of critiquing the kings to a period announcing the impending destruction and exile, first of Israel (Northern Kingdom) and later of

Judah (Southern Kingdom). Galatians and Colossians address similar issues, but in very different theological, sociological, and missiological contexts. In Luke, we continue the story of the ministry of Jesus. All three of these invite a new "jumping in," with due attention to "launching a new thing" — even if you choose to remain on the track you were following.

Plan to read all the texts and to sing/pray the Psalm in worship so that the congregation hears and responds to each, but consider your congregation's best opportunities and most pressing concerns as you select which stream to focus on for preaching and other planning.

## **Old Testament Stream: Prophetic Ministry—Calling and Working for Justice, Righteousness and Peace**

When God Speaks Judgment

Week 1, Amos: A Plumb Line for Leaders

How the plumb line figures in today's reading shows the stark difference between the kind of ministry Elijah and Elisha had, and what Amos and Hosea were called to do as prophets. Elijah and Elisha sought to call political and religious institutions of the day back into alignment with God's righteousness and justice. There was some sense, still, that there was time to repair and restore what had strayed.

As we hear from Amos and Hosea, however, time had run out. The plumb line shows things are too far gone for repair or restoration of the existing institutions and their leaders. Religious and political institutions alike were facing obliteration (Amos 7:9, 11). And the people who survived those horrors would be taken into exile (Amos 7:11, 17).

Amos was clear that he gained nothing by bringing this news. He had no political interests and stood to gain nothing economically by prophesying—especially a prophecy such as this! He was a "herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees" (7:15, NRSV)). His only interest was to speak what he had heard God tell him to say.

We still have the account of the prophecies of the pre-exilic prophets in part because they turned out to be largely correct. The Northern Kingdom was almost entirely obliterated beginning in 721 BCE, perhaps some 40 years or so after Amos's prophecy, though not during the reign of the current king, Jehoram II. All of its "high places" (sites of worship, typically on hilltops and of local gods) were destroyed. Its central palace was burned to the ground. Its political infrastructure was destroyed completely. And from what we can tell, many of its inhabitants were simply butchered by the invading Assyrian armies, either on site, en route to exile (for the five tribes that we have historical records of entering exile), or at some point after they arrived in Assyria. While there remain niche populations scattered across the globe with some story or DNA evidence linking them to the "ten lost tribes," for the most part it seems most of those ten tribes were, indeed, simply lost.

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

Yes, the plumb line is a powerful image, and there are powerful images in the other readings from Amos and Hosea later in this four-week series.

But why do a series on such strong words of judgment?

This is a question you and your team must settle together and be clear about with your congregation. They'll want to know the same thing.

I can think of two possible reasons, neither of which may apply where you are. One is historical, biblical interest. The exiles that happened to both the Northern and Southern kingdoms (Israel ca 721 BCE, Judah 587-6 BCE), what led up to them, and what happened afterward are at the heart of the prophetic literature (especially Jeremiah through Zechariah) and much of the historical literature (especially II Kings, II Chronicles, and Ezra through Esther). A good number of the Psalms also reflect on or come from the period of the exile of Judah, including the bitter Psalm 137. In a very real way, Judaism's biblical story is a story of destruction or exile and deliverance, whether in the archetypal stories of Genesis (fall, murder, flood, tower and patriarchs), or the displacement and reorientation of Abraham, or the exodus led by Moses, or the multiple times of deliverance through judges, the exiles themselves.

This underlying story of destruction or exile leading to a deliverance hoped to be permanent animated the vision of what Messiah was hoped to do and be. The cycles of destruction and renewal would cease. A reign of peace, stability and shalom would begin and last forever.

That underlying story and this hope for the renewal of the entire creation in the Messiah, whom we understand to be Jesus, the Son of God, has continued as central among Christians as well.

So, getting in touch with a linchpin in this story—the declaration of judgment that precedes a period of destruction that precedes a period of renewal—is likewise important for us, to this day.

Another possible value of this focus on judgment is to help us identify what there is about our current way of ordering ourselves as church, whether as congregations or as individuals, that stands under God's judgment and is leading us to destruction. We'll find more specific examples of this in the prophecy from Amos we hear next week. But for this week the focus could be simply on the fact that there are times when the only faithful word to be spoken is a word of judgment, a word that points unflinchingly to where our lives as they have become are inexorably headed.

Today, then, marks an opportunity to raise this simply as a point—that the word of judgment is no less the word of the God who intends, ultimately to save us—as a word of blessing or encouragement may be.

Which brings us to a further point. The word in question is God's. It isn't Amos's, or the pastor's or the lay leader's or even the bishop's. The core question for us to consider today is whether and where God is bringing such a word of judgment into our midst, and then how we will respond when God does.

This week's prophecy only identifies that things are too far gone.

Next week identifies why.

As you think about what you will say and do in worship today to launch this series, keep that in mind. And use that fact to help you make a strong segue from today's launch to next week's exploration in this series.

## Epistle Stream: Mission in the World, but not of It

Our Life in Christ

Week 1: "How We Grow in Christ"

Colossians is unique among the letters of or attributed to Paul in that Paul himself had not previously visited or been directly involved in the life of the Christian congregations there. His companion and colleague Epaphras had been there, but Paul had not (verse 7-8). That is likely part of why he does not in this letter offer specific commentary on what is happening in their midst as he could, for example, in his letter to the Christians in Galatia. Instead, he gave them more general guidance to stay the course with sound theology about Jesus (1:1-2:15), a morality grounded in Christ himself rather than the works of the law (2:16-17), and patterns of community life that reflect the love and power of God active in their midst through Christ who dwells among them (2:18-4:5).

Today's reading is the introduction to the letter, an extended and generous greeting from Paul and his coworkers. It is a greeting full of graciousness, hope, and prayer.

It is a greeting that launches us into the key theme of his letter, and into this series on our life in Christ.

And it is a greeting that specifically describes how he believes these Christians, and all of us, can continuously grow in Christ.

The heart of the prayer is in verses 9-11. Paul expresses his hope that they will "be filled with all the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" so they can "walk worthy of the Lord," and "bear fruit in every good work," as they "increase in the experiential-knowledge of God," that they will "be made powerful with all power" so they can display "all long-suffering and great-heartedness" with thanksgiving. He offers the basis for his confidence in God's answer to this prayer in verse 13. All of this can happen precisely because God has rescued them all from the "authority of darkness" and transferred them into the kingdom of God's beloved son (verse 13).

A key feature of the greetings in letters in this era is that what was said in the greeting was an important clue to the subjects the writer intended to unpack in the rest of the letter.

We start at the end, because that is where Paul has placed the premise for the hope he conveys for them in his prayer. "God rescued us from the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son." The parallel terms "authority" and "kingdom" are significant here. "Authority" speaks of generic rule, or rule everywhere, all around us. Kingdom, by contrast, implies a more specific location and community. Authority is dispersed everywhere. A kingdom is concentrated in its ruler, its domain, and its people. Authority can be disembodied. A kingdom is always enfleshed. God has rescued us from this disembodied darkness that is everywhere and brought us into a flesh and blood community under Jesus, the King, God's beloved son.

The rest of the prayer describes, step by step, how God helps us grow in Christ. First, we are filled, then we learn to walk worthy, then we bear fruit, then we increase in experiential knowledge of God, then we are made powerful (different word here than authority, because in God's kingdom all authority is located in Jesus), and all the while we are enduring suffering, growing "great-hearted," and giving thanks.

This flow matters. We are filled first, “with all experiential-knowledge of God’s will” (1:9) so we can walk in the Lord. God initiates this process through filling our conscious awareness with God’s will and way for us. This is the work and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Ours is simply to receive it so we can walk worthy of the Lord. “Walk” refers to our whole way of life. The prayer is that this infilling moves us and enables us to make everything about how we live a worthy exemplar of Jesus.

While the outpouring may be at least partly a “me and Holy Spirit” experience, the walking worthy is not. The walking itself implies all of our interactions with others and the fruit that we bear in the process of these. I can’t talk about “my walk with Christ” and keep hoarding the infilling of the Spirit for myself and consider that I am getting anywhere. If I as an individual and we as a community of disciples are not actually walking with others and bearing fruit, the flow is being short-circuited.

The flow continues. As we walk worthy and bear fruit, we also increase in experiential-knowledge now not just of God’s will, but actually of God’s own Self (1:10). Growth in theology (knowing and understanding God) comes out of growth in practice (receiving the infilling, walking worthy, and bearing fruit). Let me repeat that. Our practice forms the backbone of our true understanding of God. This is a reversal of how Western cultures have normally framed our growth, at least since the Enlightenment. Paul’s teaching is we grow in knowledge of God only as we grow in practice of God’s will and ways. The Enlightenment says we grow in knowledge first, and that enables us to grow in practice.

As our experiential-knowledge of God continues to increase in this flow, we find ourselves encountering and incorporating tremendous power (not authority, as noted above: this word means the capacity to get things done). That power isn’t there to make us able to control the circumstances around us and bend them to our will (or God’s!) but rather to enable us to grow in longsuffering (“to endure,” NRSV) and great-heartedness (“patience,” NRSV, but maybe better, generosity of spirit). In other words, the more we come to know God through this flow, the more we find the power to respond to the world with the mercy of God. And there is thanksgiving at every step of the way, every day, every hour.

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

Carefully work through the description of the flow of the growth Paul prays for the Christians in Colossae in your worship planning team. Then ask yourselves the following:

Who in your midst or others you know seem to be living more or less out of this flow?

What differences are being made right now by people who keep living out the flow Paul prays for the people of Colossae?

Send folks to go talk to these people and find out what has helped them sustain this way of discipleship and what they might suggest could help others enter and stay in it.

Whether you can find others around you or not, consider entering this flow yourselves as a team and see what happens. Commit to a spiritual exercise, at least for the weeks you are working on this service. Begin each day in Scripture reading and prayer, inviting the Spirit to fill you with experiential knowledge of God’s will. Do what you hear and learn from the Scriptures and the prayer that day. Watch what fruit emerges. See what else you learn of God. Encounter whatever power flows from that. See how that power moves you to greater mercy, both in enduring suffering and in the generosity of your spirit. And at every step, give thanks.

Invite other small groups and individuals in your congregation to join your worship planning team in this exercise during the coming week, and report what they experience as they do so via social media or email. This is both an outflow of this week's text and preparation for encountering next week's. For as we practice listening for God's will and doing it, we put ourselves in better stead to learn the fullness of who Christ is. And next week's reading is all about who Christ is!

## **Gospel Track: Learning from the Master**

Loving God and Neighbor

Week 1: "How to Be a Neighbor"

The story from Luke is so familiar that it may be difficult to hear in the way your congregation may need to hear and respond to it today. It's been made the subject of drama, of artwork, and many moral admonitions that we ought to love everyone well. We've heard it all before, right? So how do we hear it, really hear it, today?

One temptation that faces worship planners and preachers with such a familiar text is to try to come at it with some brand new "creative" approach to "spice it up." Instead, consider letting the text speak boldly in its familiarity, while keeping the question Jesus asks us to learn from always before us: Who was neighbor to the man beaten and left to die? Or, as we might put it, "How can we love our neighbor?"

While the answer to that question may appear to be obvious, "The Samaritan," that is not the answer the expert in the law gave and that Jesus commended. The literal answer the expert gave was "The one who did mercy with him" (Luke 7:37). Jesus' response, "Go on your way and do likewise" is exactly his response to us. The invitation here is for us to quit "feeling" merciful and actually start "doing" mercy. And it is to do it with those in need, not at them.

Look at all the concrete ways the Samaritan "did mercy."

1. He came near.
2. He was moved with compassion.
3. He went to him.
4. He bandaged the wounds.
5. He poured oil (a soothing agent) and wine (antiseptic) on the wounds.
6. He put him on his animal.
7. He brought him to an inn.
8. He took care of him at the inn.

All eight of these things were "triage." All eight were things this man could not do for himself in his condition. So the Samaritan did them.

But that wasn't all. He did more after that.

9. When he had to leave, he gave the innkeeper money to keep caring for him, promising to pay more if needed when he returned.

This is a bit of triage, but also something more. The Samaritan wasn't promising to come back right away and keep fixing everything for the man. Instead, he was making it possible for this man to have some kind of community to get him back on his feet again.

This was "ministry with."

Yes, we've seen this before, earlier in the gospel lessons this season, if you were following that series then. But it bears repeating. And this story is a great example of it, despite its history of serious misreadings.

The Samaritan did mercy, and he did it, hands on, with the beaten man.

This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus who loves neighbor as self. Sometimes it's about rescue, if that's needed. Sometimes it's about making sure the systems of care and community in a place have what is needed. And sometimes it's about walking away because you trust God and the resources of the community to do what is needed from there.

### **QUESTIONS FOR YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

1. Who is being beaten up on dangerous roads near you and left to die?
2. Who is being chewed up and spit out by the culture, or individuals, or groups or institutions where you are?
3. In what ways are people in your worshiping community owning that you are neighbors to these people?
4. In what concrete, physical, hands-on ways are you "doing mercy with them?"

Send out your worship planning team members and others to go and ask these questions and listen for answers. Use the images you gather from what you learn to illustrate both those beaten at the side of the road and concrete examples of doing hands-on mercy with the beaten, the recovering, and the systems of care and caring people and resources in the community. Fill the worship space with these images in art or things evocative of them, while leaving the Lord's Table and the font for their respective uses (bread and wine/water).

Then use Twitter and Facebook and other social media to keep asking for and sharing more examples throughout the following week to help prepare for the second service in this series, "Loving by Listening."

## Preaching Notes:

### Luke 10:25-37

Over the next four weeks, as we go through this study on Luke's Gospel, we are going to be looking at four stories that help us better understand what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ who is transforming the world. The four stories we will consider in this series are:

- The Parable of the Good Samaritan
- The Visit with Mary and Martha
- The Teaching on Prayer
- The Power of Possessions

I think that often when we read the parable of the Good Samaritan we miss the point of the story. In the parable, when the lawyer (who was not a lawyer like we think of a lawyer, but really more like a seminary professor or highly educated clergy person) correctly identifies the Samaritan as the neighbor, Jesus responds with the words, "That is the right answer; do this and you will live."

I think when we read Jesus' initial response we focus on the "do this." And so, we interpret the parable to mean that Jesus is telling the lawyer (and us) to go and be good Samaritans by noticing those in need and helping them. In other words, we think Jesus was telling the Good Samaritan to go and do something.

But I want to submit a different way of reading the story. I would suggest that maybe Jesus wasn't telling this man to DO something so much as he was challenging him to SEE the world around him, especially its people, in a different way. To put it another way, perhaps it isn't as much about what we do as it is about how we live.

When I was in seminary I took an extended unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. I remember that one of the first things I learned about being a chaplain in a hospital was that our work was not to DO something. Our job was to simply BE with our patients. Our role was to sit beside people during a time of need and be a loving presence. We were to be living reminders of the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ.

It is easy to see why we get focused on doing when we read the parable. After all, the first question that the lawyer asked Jesus was a "do" question: "What should I DO to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus told him straight away what he should DO: "love the Lord God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself."

That is what we are to DO as followers of Jesus Christ. It is sort of like the proposed amendment to our mission statement. What we are to DO is make disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the second question, the one that prompted Jesus to tell the parable, was not a DO question. It was a BE question. The lawyer wanted to know whom Jesus considered to BE his "neighbor." It was in response to this second question that Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan. And Jesus' meaning is clear. He told the lawyer in no uncertain terms that he must BE a neighbor to those he considered ritually unclean, socially unacceptable, and morally corrupt.

To inherit eternal life, Jesus says, we must be in loving relationship with all of God's children, especially those with whom we disagree, would judge as sinful, or even despise. As United Methodists, this is the "parable" that speaks to the second part of our mission statement. By living in this way, we participate in God's transformation of the world.

I think that the problem many of us have is the same problem that the lawyer had. We think that the way to inherit eternal life is to DO something: say the right words, believe the right things, have the right kind of baptism, give the right amount of money, join the right church, live the right way, and do the right things in this life. In this way of thinking, we have complete control of our eternal destiny. We simply earn our way to eternal life by doing the right things.

But Jesus says that the way to find eternal life is not by doing something, but by BEING something. Specifically, it is by being the kind of person the Good Samaritan was. Eternal life is discovered by living in the way of Christ for the transformation of the world.

What kind of person was the Samaritan? He was a person who, first and foremost, was neither frightened nor apathetic when he happened upon a situation of injustice in his community.

The text doesn't say why the Samaritan was walking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that day. I don't know if he was on his way home from visiting relatives or heading to work. But my sense of the story is that he was not out on a mission to do justice that day. He was not on a mission trip, or on his way to volunteer at the local food pantry, or headed to Wednesday night fellowship at his church. In other words, he was not specifically engaged in being his "church self" at that moment.

The other two people who saw the robbed, wounded and half dead man lying on the side of the road are specifically named as church people. One is a priest, and the other is a Levite.

But we don't know anything about the Samaritan other than his status as a Samaritan. Luke does not say he was a leader among the Samaritans. He is not identified as a priest, or even as a particularly observant Samaritan. The only thing we know about him personally is that he is a member of a group that is a despised rival of the Jews. And we know from the story that he was traveling along a well-known road, minding his own business, when suddenly he came upon a situation of violence and injustice happening right before his eyes. He saw a man who had been hurt, and his response was not to run in the other direction, but rather to immediately go to the side of this victim of a senseless crime and offer his assistance.

He is so moved with pity that he stops his travel plans in order to care for this man. He didn't call for someone else, some professional, to come to the man's aid. He didn't summon the police or an ambulance. He personally cleaned and bandaged the man's wounds, and then he loaded the individual on his own horse and carried the man to an Inn, where he presumably paid for a room and stayed with the man and nursed him overnight. The next day, he paid for the man to be able to stay there and rest until he was recovered. He asked the innkeeper to keep an eye on the man. And he promised to pay for any additional time the wounded man needed to stay beyond the days he paid in advance.

This Samaritan didn't just do something for this wounded stranger. He took time away from whatever it was he had planned to do that day. He let an encounter with injustice change his course of action entirely. He delayed the remainder of his trip in order to stay and sit with the man until he knew the man would be OK. And he promised to come back and check on him.

Now I don't know about you, but when I am on a road trip, whether it is driving home at the end of a long work week, or driving to visit my parents in Arkansas, or heading to the beach with my husband for vacation, and I see someone stopped on the side of the road, I don't stop to help. Why? Most often because I don't want to take time away from my own plans, nor do I want to make myself vulnerable.

Furthermore, if I saw someone in what looked to be a dangerous situation, someone who had been beaten, or who had been shot or wounded, I'm not sure what I would do. I might pull over and call the police, but I'm not sure I'd approach the car. I'm just being honest here. My tendency is to think first about whether my actions might put me in danger.

When I think about my own responses to Jesus' challenge to us all to be a neighbor not just in situations in which we don't have much information, but to be willing to take risks for anyone in need, I know that I have some work to do in my own practice of potentially world-changing discipleship. Jesus calls us to put not just our time, but our money and our very lives on the table in order to make God's merciful presence known anytime and anywhere the opportunity arises.

This isn't a story about finding easy opportunities to do some good works in our communities. It isn't even a story about answering the call to give substantially to support those in great need, or to sacrificially go and serve in places in the world where people suffer.

This is a story about how we are to live as disciples every single day, right here at home, in our own neighborhoods and churches. It is a call to see the needs of the people we meet on a walk, or in the grocery store, or on our way to do something else, and to not think first about our own safety or our own agendas, but rather to live as people who willingly let the needs of the world around us interrupt our plans so that we never miss an opportunity to offer mercy to all of God's children. This, says Jesus, is how we transform the world.

- How are you responding to God's call to be the kind of neighbor who is willing to offer God's mercy to all?
- What is the difference between DOING and BEING when it comes to discipleship?
- How does this story challenge or inspire you to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?
- How can you live differently, even in small ways, to become a person who doesn't just view acts of injustice, violence, and oppression from a comfortable distance, but who is willing to place yourself right into the middle of situations in order to offer God's mercy and healing love?

## Graphics & Resources

- [Amos Speaks to Amaziah: A Meditative Litany Based on Amos 7:7-17](#)
- [Who Is My Neighbor?: A Responsive Reading Based on Luke 10:25-37](#)
- [When We Would Neighbor Be](#)
- [Who Is My Neighbor?](#)
- [We Have Not Loved](#)

**Living as Disciples Worship Series: WEEK 2**  
**Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – July 21, 2019**

## Calendar Notes:

July  
July 4      [Independence Day \(USA\)](#)

August  
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With a four-week story arc, the energy profile of the series is likely to be naturally either “ever upward” or “ever deeper.” The Epistle readings could easily be handled in an “ever-upward” direction. The Old Testament readings probably work best with an “ever-deeper” approach. The gospel readings could go either way.

Schools may be resuming within the next few weeks. Some start as early as the first or second week of August. See our Back to School resources for ideas and suggestions.

## Commentary

You should be in week 2 of your new series now. Be sure to build on the momentum from last week’s series launch and keep it moving into next week.

Plan to read all the texts and to sing/pray the Psalm in worship so that the congregation hears and responds to each, but keep the focus of worship overall clearly on the stream and series you have chosen.

## Old Testament Stream: Prophetic Ministry—Calling and Working for Justice, Righteousness, and Peace

When God Speaks Judgment

Week 2: Righteousness and Justice for People

Last week we heard God's announcement that Israel's religious and political leadership had been checked by God's plumb line and found too "out of plumb" to be allowed to stand. They would all be destroyed.

This week's reading, especially in verses 4-6, names the reasons for the judgment and impending destruction: abusing and destroying poor farm workers, short-shrifting the Sabbath to have more hours for sales, fraudulent weights and scales, putting the poor into indentured servitude, and selling what should have been left for gleaners to feed their families. No doubt, there had been isolated and maybe even widespread instances of all these injustices in the past. Now, it seems, all these were simply standard practice.

What was supposed to happen? Everyone's labor was to be fairly rewarded. The Sabbath was to be observed in its entirety by all, Israelite and alien in the land alike, for the rest and restoration of all. Weights and scales were to be accurate to ensure a fair price for all, especially the poor. Slavery and indentured servitude were forbidden at this point. And parts of everyone's fields were to be left unharvested and the "sweepings" of the harvested part left on the ground, so the poor could gather food from them if they could not afford to buy it.

This is what people did for one another because they were God's people, and their God required and cared for justice for all, especially the poor and the alien. This is the God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and had given them a land more than able to support everyone who lived there. Creating an economy that oppressed the poor and the alien at every turn and harmed everyone by reducing their time for rest, as this economy now regularly did, was an affront to the character of their God. God would not allow such an abomination to stand.

Amos was graphic about what God was about to do. Earthquakes would break the earth so the land would "flow" like the Nile (8:8). Festivals would become death traps. All singing would be dirges. People may try to repent, shaving their heads and putting on sackcloth, but in fact God would take away everything but sackcloth and destroy the hair on their heads before they could even shave it (8:10). And worse, there would be no prophets or voices of any kind to speak a word from God that might bring comfort or hope. They would suffer horribly, and God would be unrelentingly silent (8:11).

That is roughly what happened. Amos's prophecies began in 762, about two years before an earthquake significant enough to be remembered as a time marker (760). The armies of Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom beginning in 721 BC. All who had any means, including all the religious and political leaders, were carried off and never heard from again. They weren't simply "lost." They were destroyed. Only the "poor of the land" survived, if you could call it survival when their buildings were burned, their roads destroyed and much of their land ruined. It was genocide and utter desolation. After 721, what had been the Northern Kingdom produced no "words from the Lord" that have survived.

At least, not until Jesus began his ministry in the most ruined heart of that territory, “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

Amos had declared this would happen because God “not forgetting, will never forget their actions,” the abomination that their economy, their whole way of life, had become. (See verse 7).

This was judgment visited on a whole nation because the primary ways the nation organized its economy were rotten to the core by God’s standards.

This is important to notice and note in our fundamentally individualistic cultures in the Global North and West, and to whatever degree that cultural individualism has infiltrated our theology and practices of relationship with God, neighbor, and other nations and peoples.

As you plan, remember Amos's point was simply to name the injustices that led God to announce judgment. This text does not provide an excuse to attack “other” people or peoples in worship today. It is rather an opportunity to help the congregation see how they may be participating in such economic practices offensive to God by their actions or inaction and begin to respond to God's call for economic justice and access for all, especially for “the poor of the land,” many of whom in Amos’s day would have been migrant farm workers and day laborers from other countries. There were no passports or border patrols as we now know them. Today in the U.S., these would be known as “undocumented aliens.”

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

It’s another hard text to get into. So help your folks do so.

Invite folks to bring in whatever the local summer fruit is where you are, whether they’re growing it in gardens or buying it in markets. Gather these into a basket that all can see and perhaps even smell as they arrive in the worship space. Consider sharing the fruit with children and others as this lesson is read. As you do, take a pause after verse 1. Give folks time to savor what they’re eating.

Then continue.

This prophecy evokes this rich, comforting image of a basket of summer fruit only immediately to betray it almost immediately through a wordplay that works in Hebrew and several other semitic languages (Arabic and Aramaic/Syriac, among them), but not in English. Summer fruit is qayitz (ka’-yitz) in Hebrew. The text gives us this word twice already—first in saying God showed it to Amos, and then Amos replying what he sees. Summer fruit. Summer fruit. But rather than continuing the image of summer fruit (ka’-yitz), God’s very next word rhymes with it—qets (kaits)—“end.” It’s powerfully unsettling in Hebrew, but impossible to capture in English. Don’t try during the reading. Explain it during the sermon.

Instead, during the reading consider adding a verse just prior to verse 3 that continues the same spirit and does work as a play on words in English, such as the following:

It was the morning. The Lord asked me, "What time of the day is it, Amos?"

"Morning."

"Mourning shall replace the songs of praise,  
loud lamentation the thanksgivings of the people,  
and the streets of your cities shall be open graves."

When it's time to preach this week, keep in mind where this series started and where it's going. And bring back to the congregation's mind why you are pursuing this series—whatever reason you identified last week (whether to go deeper into a core narrative of the whole Bible, or to help you identify what God is judging where you are, or some other reason).

Then remind folks that last week you heard from Amos **that** inexorable judgment was coming on leaders and institutions. And this week we hear **why** such judgment was also going to come to the whole people.

Everything we see in Jesus tells us God still rejects the kinds of practices identified in verses 4-6. Are any of them part of “standard practice” in your congregation, community, or local or regional or national economy? If so, simply declare with the prophet that these stand under God's judgment and can lead to the destruction of whole nations, not just those they currently target most (the poor — scales and gleaning), the outsider/alien (most likely to become enslaved), and the average worker (scales and shorting Sabbath).

To prepare for this, document in and through your worship planning team:

1. Places around you where rest becomes either limited or impossible because of the demands of the economy.
2. Places where there are still unfair scales.
3. Places and ways where the poor and their children are being sold for shoes or clothing or iPads, or locked into actual or virtual slavery.
4. Places where the poor are regularly given access to substantially lower quality goods and services or actively prevented from obtaining the basic necessities of life.

Consider using images of these places and abuses as you read verses 3-6.

But also consider more. Who are the people in your congregation or community, or people your folks know or know of, who have taken on the prophetic, baptismal task of resisting such evils? Send planning team members to talk with them and learn their stories. What led them to resist? How did they resist? What happened because they resisted? How did they find God at work in and around them when they resisted? What did they learn and wish to convey to others?

Then use what you gather to highlight what people in your congregation and community are doing to resist these forms of evil, injustice, and oppression as they present themselves.

Conclude the sermon with one or more concrete invitations to join the resistance and those who are resisting.

Keep those most targeted by such forms of oppression and those who persist in oppressing them by their action or inaction front and center in your prayers today.

Celebrate Holy Communion as a means to receive the freedom and power Christ gives you to resist.

And send folks forth in the power of the Spirit to continue the resistance in their daily lives.

## **Epistle Stream: Mission *in* the World, but not *of* It**

Our Life in Christ

Week 2: Christ in Y'all, the Hope of Glory

"Our Life in Christ" may sound like a boring title for a boring series. Your launch last week and the testimonies that may be coming out this week as people live into the flow Paul describes may already have helped dispel any idea that this series, much less life in Christ itself, is boring!

This week's reading will do that even more.

Yes, we live our lives in a day to day world, full of all kinds of routines. But our life in is Christ now. And because we are incorporated into Christ, we are part of and in connection with a Love, Power, and Being that can only blow our minds as we consider it.

That's what Paul was telling a congregation he never met in a backwater imperial city in what is now Turkey the middle of the first century.

And it's what we celebrate today in this second part of our four-part series in his letter to them long ago.

It's all about "Christ in y'all, the hope of glory" (verse 27).

As we live into the flow of hearing and doing the will of God, and bearing fruit as a result, we get to know God in Christ, who is in us (plural), better and better.

And as we come to know Christ better and better, we come to be able to confess everything Paul says about him in verses 15-20 more and more fully (NRSV).

He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation;  
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,  
    things visible and invisible,  
    whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—  
all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.  
He is the head of the body, the church;  
he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,  
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,  
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
    whether on earth or in heaven,  
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This Jesus, whom we are coming to know more and more as we hear and respond faithfully to God's will, is all that!

As we come to know him more and more, it becomes no wonder that we can increase in endurance and generosity of spirit (1:11), and no wonder that in the face of sufferings, we can still, like Paul, rejoice (1:24).

Truly, Christ in us all, or Christ in y'all, is the hope of glory (verse 27), and the hope of glory is revealed more and more as we continue to mature fully into Christ (verse 28).

The pronouns are plural, and that matters. Paul could have said, "Christ in each one of you." He did not. He said, "Christ in you (plural)." So, y'all, or even "all y'all" (or, for those in Western Pennsylvania, "yins" or "yinses").

This hope of glory becomes real for us, plural, as we, plural, bear witness to one another and to our neighbors of Christ moving, leading, and drawing us, individually and collectively, into deeper knowledge of him.

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

Keep building!

There's ample material in this week's text to do just that.

And, if you and your team will ask and listen, you'll find ample material in your congregation as well.

Some of it you may be able to draw from the stories you've shared over the weeks you've been preparing this service in your team. Some of it, too, you may draw from what you've heard and seen in the groups and via social media you asked to talk about what happens as they enter the flow Paul describes during this past week.

But for this week, you may draw even more in your discussions in your team about people in your congregation who are already living witnesses that Christ is "all that" as described in verses 15-20 and identify the visible signs of Christ being just like this where you are.

But don't stop with the happy things. Keep asking folks on your team, and through your team in your congregation and community, to share stories of how suffering then came to play into their own growth in and witness to Christ.

Let the sermon today unpack verses 15-20 as reasons your congregation can come to know "Christ in y'all, the hope of glory," using these stories as living witnesses, not just illustrations.

Consider using verses 15-20 as a confession of faith after the sermon (see UMH 888).

Through the coming week, encourage folks to keep sharing these kinds of stories on social media or in small groups.

And both know and trust that these will help them prepare for next week's focus, "The All Sufficiency of Christ to Save Us."

## **Gospel Stream: Learning from the Master**

Loving God and Neighbor

## Week 2: Loving by Listening

In [Luke](#) we are offered the stark contrast between Mary and Martha. Mary stops and listens; Martha stays busy.

Western, and increasingly, Eastern capitalist-driven cultures are all about Martha, to be sure. Productivity, getting things done, being on the move and available 24/7, the “never sleeps” economy—this is how you “get ahead in the world,” right?

At least, it’s what many of our cultures, corporations, and political cultures seem to reward and call for more of, all the time.

If you followed the suggestion to encourage folks to write in about how they are “doing” mercy “with” others, perhaps you’ve encouraged the Martha side a bit as well.

Or have you?

The core problem Jesus identifies with Martha in this story is not that she is busy. It is that she is in an uproar (the verb here, *thorubazein*, comes from the noun, *thorubos*, which refers to the noise of a stirred-up crowd). She’s overwhelmed, distracted from what matters, and lashing out at everyone else.

And not just her sister.

Even her guest.

Even if Martha was overwhelmed with trying to serve her guest, a basic and expected act of hospitality, here she has blown it.

She tries to use her guest to do what she, in her uproar, is convinced must be done, right now.

The one thing needful right now, Jesus says, is to listen, as Mary had chosen to do.

If you want to serve your guest, or anyone else, you need to listen first. Really listen. Do nothing else. Let go all other distractions. Turn off the livestream in your head that diagnoses what others need. Just listen.

To love your neighbor as yourself, and to love God—both require this, first of all.

Turn off the uproar. Stop. Listen.

We don’t know what Martha did next.

But we do know what Luke reports Jesus did next.

He was praying. (Luke 11:1).

There is goodness in work of all kinds. This story nowhere tells us to stop working, or only to meditate all the time, or to disengage from the duties we have toward one another. It tells us not to let ourselves become overwhelmed. It tells us instead to focus on what matters most.

And to do that, first we must listen.

We love and learn to love better by listening to God, neighbor, and guest—all whom we serve and with whom we seek to serve.

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

Start your planning team meeting with a reflection on the image at the top of these helps. Go to the original website, click on the image, then click to enlarge it so you and your team can see the details. This is an altar-table at a Lutheran church in Denmark. In case you are wondering, the words surrounding the image are the Words of Institution (bread on the left, cup on the right) and the Lord's Prayer (below). To the left just below, it says "In the year 1600, September 6, by Hans Rosenberg." To the right "This altar-table set, IHS." (IHS is both the first three letters of the name of Jesus in Greek, and the initials of Jesus, Savior of Humankind in Latin. The idea here is this is given to the honor or glory of Christ).

The image in the middle is from today's story.

Martha is on the left, standing, holding a jug (for wine?) in her right hand and a plate of bread on her left. Mary is sitting on a bench on the right, and slightly in the foreground, looking at Jesus. Jesus is seated in the middle, with his head and gaze turned toward Martha. Martha's body is turned toward both Jesus and Mary, but her gaze appears to be on Jesus.

Ask members of the planning team to interpret the facial expressions and body postures of the characters in this painting. What do we learn about each of them based on how they are portrayed here?

Now take it one step deeper. Martha holds the bread and wine. The bread in her left hand corresponds with the words about the bread in the left panel. The wine in her right corresponds with the words about the wine on the right panel. What do you and your team members make of this?

What you have just engaged in might be called an act of "visual listening." Like Mary in the biblical story and in this altarpiece, you have paid close, maybe even rapt attention to this painting, seeking to understand it and its place in the larger altar-table set and so in that church. To do this, you had to let go of a lot of the noise in your heads, get past distractions, and simply focus. You were guided by questions that helped you begin to make sense of what you were seeing, and you brought other questions as well. Your aim was not to control or use this painting toward some other end, but to understand it on its own terms as much as possible.

If this exercise goes well for your team, consider how you might replicate it as the core of the sermon/message time in worship. In settings larger than 150, you may want to encourage folks to talk among themselves in smaller groups to share what they are seeing about each of the figures and their interaction as portrayed here. In those larger settings, to model listening across the whole church, be sure to ask the small groups to have one person prepared to report out the gist of what was shared in the group.

As a response to the Word, invite persons to a time of listening or centering prayer.

From there, move into prayers for the church and the world, invitation to the Lord's Table, confession, pardon, peace, offering (use music that leads the congregation in a time of meditative thanksgiving), and the Great Thanksgiving. If you use the "Appalachian Lord's Supper" commended for this series, be sure

to give extra time for people to name and be heard where they (or their people) are from as a way of listening to one another and offering all of who we are to God.

As people are sent forth, invite them then and throughout the week to share testimonies of what they've learned about loving God and neighbor by listening to God and others this week. This will also be a good lead-in to next week's focus, "Letting God Love You."

## Preaching Notes:

### Luke 10:38-42

So this second week in our series on "Living as Disciples for the Transformation of the World" we consider the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. For those of you who read my words regularly what I'm about to write may sound like I am beating a dead horse, but I simply cannot and will not read the story of Mary and Martha as an indictment of Martha and a lauding of Mary. The time has come to put that horse in its coffin, especially in light of Pope Francis' recent [acknowledgment](#) that Christian history indicates that women in the early church served as deacons, and (in my opinion) likely were ordained by the laying on of hands as men were.

While there are a number of interpretative perspectives offered by scholars, I will summarize the work of my favorite, Bonnie Thurston (*Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998). (Note that I am repeating here some of what I have written in past notes.)

Thurston writes that this story appears in Luke's Gospel during the period when Jesus has "set his face to Jerusalem." All along his route, from the region of Galilee in the north down towards Jerusalem in the south, Jesus gathers crowds of people and teaches them. So in these stories, many of his teachings are meant for both the crowds and his disciples and traveling companions.

Many of these teachings occur in the context of a meal, and often involve Pharisees. Jesus meets a variety of people on his journey, including wealthy and poor, clean and unclean, righteous and "sinners."

In today's story Jesus stops in at the home of Mary and Martha after passing through Samaria. The usual interpretation of this story pits the two women against each other, usually as a way of focusing on Mary as the more favored and righteous of the two sisters. In contrast, Martha is portrayed as so distracted by fixing dinner and cleaning up afterwards that Jesus must scold her for not putting her domestic duties aside and joining Mary for the study session. The lesson: be like Mary and don't be like Martha. Take time to listen quietly to Jesus. Don't be distracted by your housework or anything else.

Even though I have always thought Martha gets a bum rap in this story, for many years I had a hard time finding any commentary on this passage that didn't do this. Placing these two important women as adversaries seems to be the only way most commentators have come up with to interpret its meaning.

Following Thurston, then, I want to suggest that instead of contrasting these two sisters a fresh interpretation would be to focus on two main points.

First, this story represents clear and convincing evidence that women were active as leaders in the early stages of the Jesus movement. In this story we see women who are referred to by their own names (as

opposed to being identified by their relationship with a male) and who host Jesus in their home. Notice that in Luke's version of the story they are not identified as the sisters of Lazarus; rather, "a woman named Martha welcomed him into *her* home" (10:38, emphasis mine).

In the ancient world this would have been unusual. Only under certain circumstances were women legally allowed to own property, and very few women met the criteria. But here we have a home identified not as belonging to their brother Lazarus, but to Martha, the shunned and scolded sister. So this fact, in and of itself, ought to give us pause to think about what it means. I can't imagine that the author of Luke provided this detail unintentionally. What might Luke be telling us about Mary and Martha through his careful wording?

And second, in spite of much of interpretive history, this really is not a text that pits housework against study, or even works righteousness against grace. For example, despite my own assumption above that a meal and its clean-up was involved in Martha's domestic distractions, there is actually no reference at all to an elaborate meal being prepared or served.

Luke, in fact, chooses a very technical term to describe Martha's work in verse 40: *diakonian*. In the NRSV this word is translated as "many tasks" but Thurston provides more insight. She writes,

Martha, we are told in v. 40, "was distracted by her many tasks, 'literally' by much *servicing*." Again, the Greek word is *diakonian*, which in Luke is used more in the context of "activity of an in-between kind," "spokesperson," than of "waiting tables." *Diakonia* in Luke-Acts. . . denotes participation with others in leadership and ministry on behalf of the community. Six of its eight uses in Acts point to leadership in the church and proclamation of the Gospel. Is Martha's "servicing" domestic activity or ministry? It may well be that Martha is distracted by "much ministry."

So Martha's many distracting tasks may not have been the dinner table, but rather, the overwhelming work of ministry. The word *diakonia* is also the root of the word for the ecclesiastical office of "deacon" in the early church. Perhaps the distraction Martha was experiencing was related to her ministerial function rather than her domestic function.

Perhaps there is opportunity here to cast this story in a completely new light.

- What if Martha's chief complaint isn't that Mary is failing to help with the housework, but rather that she isn't keeping up her half of the ministerial duties in the parish they lead together? Is Mary spending too much time "in the office studying" and leaving Martha to do all the pastoral care, administrative work, and worship preparation alone?
- What if, instead of putting these two women in opposition to one another, we focus on the amazing fact that these two women were remembered by Luke's community as beloved disciples of Jesus and leaders in the Jesus movement. Had they become, by the time of Luke's writing around the year 75, deacons who co-lead an early Christian community or house church out of their home in Bethany?

Given all of this re-envisioning of a familiar, how does it inform and enrich our understanding of our call to live as disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? What does it mean for how women have been restricted from leadership roles for the majority of the tradition?

I can't help but think about how long it has taken for those who proclaim the Christian faith to come to a point in which women are given the same opportunities as men. As they say, we have come a long way baby. But I am gravely aware that these changes are very recent and limited to my own perspective as a citizen of the United States. Women have had the right to vote in my country only since 1920. Less than 100 years! And the Methodist Church, one of the few denominations that ordains women, has been doing so only since 1956. That is 60 years, less than a generation. Furthermore, these decisions and other human rights are constantly in danger of being reversed by those who do not believe women should have equal rights with men. We must not take the current status for granted.

In the vast majority of Christian faith and practice around the world, women are still denied a place among the ordained clergy leadership in the church. But the United Methodist Church has been at the forefront of changing this. As we celebrate 60 years of the ordination of women in the United Methodist Church, we are seeing progress in women in leadership in church planting. At the national interdenominational summit on church planting, *Exponential*, held in Orlando, Florida, in April of 2016, the United Methodist Church's church-planting division, Path I, held a pre-conference meeting especially for women called to church planting.

The Rev. Dr. Candace M. Lewis, Associate General Secretary of the New Church Starts Division of Discipleship Ministries and Executive Director of Path I, said the story of Mary and Martha reminds her that women in leadership must, like our Biblical female forerunners, have the confidence to do the work of leading and serving in all areas of leadership in the church. The theme of their gathering was "Women in Church Planting Called by God to Lead and Serve." Women gathered and claimed their sense of call and encouraged each other to be fearless in living out their call to lead and serve. In doing so, says Dr. Lewis, "we create space in congregations for knowing that Jesus invites the gifts of all people to the work of leadership." Dr. Lewis says she hopes and prays that women in ministry can continue to be confident and courageous in Jesus' invitation to service by both the "Mary's" and the "Martha's" among us.

I am continuously amazed and inspired by the leadership and witness not only of Mary, Martha, Phoebe, Lydia, Mary, the mother of Jesus, but of many other women from the Old and New Testaments, as well as Christian women in history and in our current day.

- Who has served as an inspiration and example of courageous leadership for women in your church?
- Are there women whose faith and practice helped to shape you in your discipleship? Can you share a few stories of the impact of women's leadership on your life personally?
- What can you do to encourage, empower, and equip the young women and girls in your church to take their place of leadership for the future of the denomination?

## Graphics & Resources

- **Call to Worship Based on Colossians 1:15-28**
- **THE GREAT THANKSGIVING FOR THE SEASON AFTER PENTECOST (ORDINARY TIME, OR KINGDOMTIDE)**

**Living as Disciples Worship Series: WEEK 3**  
**Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – July 28, 2019**

## Calendar Notes:

July  
July 4      [Independence Day](#) (USA)

August  
All Month   [Back to School](#)  
August 6    [Hiroshima/Nagasaki Memorial](#)

## Planning for this Series:

We continue the Season after Pentecost. The liturgical color is green.

Schools may be resuming within the next few weeks. Some start as early as the first or second week of August. See our [Back to School](#) resources for ideas and suggestions.

## Commentary:

Which of the Scripture streams are you focusing on in these weeks? Plan to stay with that stream until the next full "stream switch." The OT book changes today (from Amos to Hosea), but the Epistle reading is still in Colossians. Both will change on August 7 (Isaiah for two weeks, and Hebrews).

## Old Testament Stream: Prophetic Ministry—Calling and Working for Justice, Righteousness, and Peace

When God Speaks Judgment

Week 3: When Pity Is Exhausted

We begin two weeks with the prophet [Hosea](#) today.

Last week we focused on what had brought judgment on the people of the Northern Kingdom, Israel.

This week we enter into the realm of a prophet who brings the same message of judgment from God to the same people under the same king (Jereboam II) at roughly the same time (Amos and Hosea may have overlapped each other's ministries to some degree.

But this prophet seems to have even less hope than Amos, who seems to have had practically none.

Hosea is a prophet who enters deeply, in every way he can, into what it means to live under a sentence of destruction by God.

This week we are introduced to his story and how his marriage and the naming of his children connect to the heart of the message he brings.

Hosea married a prostitute as a way of saying the nation had prostituted itself. Past tense. Done. Fait accompli. Not redeemable.

Then he gave his children horrifying names to reflect God's rejection of the people and the reasons for it.

*Jezreel* was a name that had largely gone out of use because the place was considered cursed by God. The battle there, led by King Jehu, was considered so bloody and outrageously unjust that God swore never to leave Jehu's house unpunished.

*Lo-Ruhamah* means not-pitied, an announcement that God would have no more leniency on Israel for its past or present atrocities, nor would God do anything to prevent their coming exile and destruction. Judah (the Southern Kingdom) would be spared, but not Israel.

Finally, *Lo-Ammi* (not my people) signaled God's rejection of the people. Though a day of restoration of some kind may come eventually, it would not be in their foreseeable futures.

Cursed. Not Pitied. Not my people. These were Hosea's children, whom he loved. Just as God viewed the people of Israel. Hosea embodied in his family, whom he continued to love, what it meant that God's pity for God's own people had become exhausted.

There was love. And at the same time, there was the stark recognition these people had no long-term future in God's sight.

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

This week marks the nadir of the four-week series. Next week we hear more about the love that will still try to redeem whatever may be redeemable after judgment falls.

But not this week.

This week it is cursed, not pitied, not my people. Full stop. For them. Later, for others, maybe something better.

But not now.

And now is what matters.

This week invites us into the pathos of what it means to live with the reality that everyone you know, and everything your nation and people have known, is headed for destruction.

It is a day for listening and lament.

And it is a day for wondering.

How do we live in the face of not simply our own mortality but the promise of our obliteration as a people?

Holocaust survivors and their families know something about this. Many refugees and survivors of genocide campaigns know something about this. Some of our sisters and brothers in The United Methodist Church in places like Eastern Congo wracked by civil war that destroyed villages, infrastructure and millions of lives know something about this.

Find people where you are—or whom you can contact-- who know something about this. These are people who may have known or feared the destruction was coming, and then witnessed it, even if they got away or survived. Take the time to find them and listen to their stories. Ask what it was like to be part of a people cursed, not pitied, many even feeling like they were abandoned by God.

Let Hosea's voice and their voices be heard today.

And help your people listen.

This will not be a feel-good Sunday. It will be a "get in touch with real despair" Sunday. It will be an "enter into the sufferings of others" Sunday.

Include in your prayers a strong focus on people everywhere who have been or are currently facing destruction they cannot escape as a whole people.

Consider using a more penitential, more somber version of The Great Thanksgiving today, such as Word and Table IV.

And send folks out to keep listening for these stories during the coming week, taking time just to listen, and let it all sink in.

## **Epistle Stream: Mission in the World, but not of It**

Series 2: Our Life in Christ

Week 3: The All-Sufficiency of Christ to Save Us

As we live into the flow of hearing and doing God's will, bearing fruit and learning to know God more and more (Week 1), we keep finding more and more just how amazing and true the confession of faith Paul makes about Christ (verses 15-20) really is, and we come to know and feel, even in the face of suffering, just how Christ in us is the hope of glory (Week 2).

A question some Christian missionaries were posing in these early years, however, was whether that was enough to ensure we would in fact be fully saved. Some were insisting that non-Jewish believers

must first become Jewish, and their males be circumcised, before they could hope for the full effects of salvation to take place in their lives.

Here, as elsewhere throughout his writings, Paul rejected this approach outright. In Christ the fullness of God dwells bodily (2:9), and so if we are in Christ—as those who have been baptized into Christ are (verse 2:12)—then there is no need of circumcision or participation in ceremonies of the covenant of Israel because all of them have already been fulfilled in Christ into whom we have been joined. (2:16-17). The salvation Jesus offers is offered to all, and effective for all, regardless of whether they are Jewish or Gentile.

Paul equally opposed some ascetic and what we might call “charismatic” missionaries who were insisting that persons were not truly “in Christ” unless they were harshly disciplining their bodies, or speaking in tongues (perhaps what “the worship of angels” alludes to here), or able to have and talk about visions from God all the time (2:18).

No, it’s not Jewish, ascetic or charismatic practices that save us. God saves us all in Christ, and once we are in Christ, incorporated into his body through baptism, God continues to grow us all, individually and together. In Christ, and through Christ, God both does and will fully save us from the power of sin and death in this life and for the age to come.

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

Today, few if any Christian missionaries anywhere seek to insist that Gentiles become Jewish or take on core Jewish practices if they wish to become “real Christians.” There are likewise few if any who insist on asceticism as a precondition of salvation. There are some (notably in the [United Pentecost Church](#) and parallel movements) who insist one isn’t fully saved until one speaks in tongues.

The presence or absence of these particular detractors of or distractors from the gospel, as Paul might have called them, does not deflect from the core teaching of [this week’s reading](#). God has already given us all we need to be fully saved from the power of sin and death in Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Select songs that celebrate the all-sufficiency of God’s love and power to save us in Christ.

Consider focusing the sermon today on two elements of today’s reading. First, we are in Christ through baptism (2:11-12). And second, and perhaps primarily for today, what God has done to ensure salvation in and through Christ, requiring neither law nor particular forms or spiritual practice nor asceticism as pre-requisites (2:13-15).

In your prayers today, pray that we all may “come to fullness in [Christ]” (verse 10), and for all who seek to do so.

At the Lord’s Table, that great feast of our salvation made possible through Christ, celebrate the fullness of the deliverance he offers us.

And send folks forth committed to keep growing in Christ, letting go all that gets in the way, and putting on Christ more and more.

## Gospel Stream: Learning from the Master

Loving God and Neighbor

Week 3: "Letting God Love You"

This week we learn from Jesus what to pray and how to pray. If most Christian congregations know any "written" prayer, it is most likely the Lord's Prayer, though in a version that actually appears in neither Luke nor Matthew.

Some of us may have been taught the Lord's Prayer is simply a model prayer, primarily a basis for forming prayers or even for forming worship.

[Luke's gospel](#) presents us with what may be an unfamiliar version of the Lord's prayer and a context in which it is clear the disciples were looking for Jesus to give them a specific prayer to pray. "Lord, teach us to pray" meant, and means, "Lord, give us a prayer — your prayer that marks us as your disciples." Giving them a prayer was not giving them magic words. It was, however, giving them language that would both mark and form them in their relationship with God and their master. So that was what Jesus gave them — a specific prayer for them to use. It is short, densely packed and memorable. "When you pray," Jesus said, "say this."

This is a text that lends itself as a reading and a sermon/teaching time all in one. Offer the words of the Lord's Prayer from Luke's Gospel on a screen or in a handout that all can easily read. Pray it with the congregation several times. Help the congregation learn it; keep praying it until the congregation can say it without needing to look at the words. (Consider using this form of the prayer at Holy Communion today as well!).

And don't stop there. The words of the prayer are good to know by heart. Prayer is one of the chief ways we listen to God.

Listen, too, to what Jesus says next about how we pray. He doesn't give us postures or gestures or even a list of feelings or attitudes to conjure up when we pray.

He gives us these remarkable little stories about waking a friend at midnight, or a child asking her father for a fish or an egg. Of course in all of these stories, the friend or the father gives what is requested, and maybe more. Because a father or a friend wants to, even if the wanting to is sometimes more driven by the persistence of the requester than good sense.

If that weren't clear enough, Jesus says it outright at the end. "How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask" (11:13).

God longs to love us! One of the chief ways God is able to express that love and care for us is through responding to our prayers—including "The Lord's Prayer," but not limited to it.

So, when we pray, we not only listen to God, give attention to God's word and God's direction in our lives, and so love God.

We also let God love us.

So, pray as Jesus taught.

And pray for whatever you need, or others need.

Pray because you love God.

And let God, in your praying, love you.

And if you and your worshiping community are not ready for confessing the faith with joy, praying for the church and the world with new fervor, and celebrating around the Lord's Table after that, well. . .

## Preaching Notes:

### Luke 11:1-13

This week in our series on “Living as Disciples for the Transformation of the World” we will consider Jesus’ teaching on how disciples are to pray.

As Christians and as United Methodists, most of us assume that we are expected to pray. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, listed prayer as one of the spiritual disciplines to which we are to attend to daily. According to a [Pew Research report](#), 55 percent of American Christians say they pray every day. These persons rely on prayer when making personal decisions and consider prayer an essential part of their identity. There are literally millions of books of prayers, books on how to pray, and books about the power of prayer. We assume that since Jesus prayed, that means that we also should pray.

And the disciples apparently thought the same thing. They saw their teacher praying and they asked him to teach them how to pray.

I think this is a very important teaching, in part because as I think about it, I do not really remember anyone ever specifically teaching me how to pray. Perhaps that is an unfair statement, as a primary way we learn is by observing and doing. The Latin adage *lex orandi lex credendi*, means “the law of praying is the law of believing.” This is to say that we learn what we believe as disciples of Jesus Christ through the act of praying together, particularly in the corporate worship of God. Praying together leads to belief, as participating in the liturgy of the church leads to theological understanding.

In addition to what I learned about how to pray through corporate worship, which included praying The Lord’s Prayer, I also learned some things by watching my family members pray. We prayed before meals, although in my family of origin, we had a “set” mealtime prayer that we took turns offering. I observed my grandmother praying on her knees by the side of her bed every night before retiring whenever I visited her home. My grandmother prayed aloud, so I learned by listening to what she said in her prayers.

I could go on with my own examples, but I am only offering them as a way of encouraging you to think about how you learned to pray, and to consider what kinds of things you tend to include in your prayers.

- Are your prayers different when praying alone than they are when you are praying aloud in worship?
- What is different? Why is it different?
- How does this teaching challenge you in your own practice of prayer, both privately and corporately?

The standard Jesus has given us for how we are to pray is the rubric of the Lord's prayer. But notice here that Jesus doesn't actually instruct the disciples to pray. He simply answers their question about HOW to pray. Jesus says when we pray we should approach God like a child going to a parent. He says, "Pray like this: God, we honor you on earth more than we honor our own flesh and blood parents. Please come to rule our lives every day that we have on this earth. Help us to not worry about the future. We ask only for enough bread to get through this day. Don't forgive us our sins until we have found a way to forgive every person who has done us wrong. And please God, do not test our faith too much because we know that we are weak and that we will surely fail."

In Luke's account of the teaching of The Lord's Prayer, Jesus follows his teaching on how to pray with a teaching on the importance of perseverance. It is not clear whether the call to perseverance is related to the teaching on prayer, but from Luke's placement, we might conclude that it is. Starting at Verse 5, Jesus says, "Suppose you should go to a friend's house after midnight and wake her up to borrow three loaves of bread because an unexpected guest has just dropped by and you have nothing to feed him. And suppose that your friend on the other side of the door on which you are knocking says, 'Go away. We've already gone to bed.' I tell you, keep on knocking. Even if she will not give in to you out of friendship, she will finally let you in because you are not ashamed to keep on asking."

If we apply this teaching to prayer, it means that when we pray, if we don't get an answer right away, or we don't get the answer we hoped to hear, we've got to keep trying. We must persevere. We are to keep asking patiently, day by day, and we are not to take God's silence as a sign of rejection.

Jesus then says that when we pray, we are to take the attitude that we are God's beloved children. This business about the fish and the snake, and the egg and the scorpion, is a way of saying that God is like a loving parent who already knows our needs even before we ask. And it is an assurance that God always has our best interests in mind.

My 20-year old son, who lives a couple of states away, has been visiting us for the past week. This morning he slept in (again. He is on vacation, after all). Since I am working from home right now, I worked quietly downstairs, listening for him to wake up and stir so I could prepare breakfast for him. I do not often cook breakfast, so I knew that making him breakfast would carry special meaning for him. It would not be expected and he would never ask for me to make him breakfast. But it would be welcomed, and it would be a special treat for me to do this for him.

Even though he has been out of our house for over a year, as his mother who carried him in my womb, gave birth to him, and raised him every day of his life, I know how he is wired. I can anticipate what he wants and needs. He doesn't have to ask. I dare say, sometimes I might even know his needs before he knows them himself! And what I say of my relationship with my son, I can also say of my relationship with my own parents.

(Note here: not everyone is fortunate to be raised by attentive and loving parents, so in preaching we must be sensitive to this reality. If a person was raised by abusive parents, or had parents absent from their life, they will hear this teaching about God in a very different way from the way that I do. This is not to diminish the teaching, but only to raise awareness about the varying experiences of the people who sit in our pews.)

The point Jesus is making to his disciples is that God loves God's children as a parent loves her child. God loves us and wants the best for us. God anticipates our every need and desire, even before we may know them ourselves.

For me, when it comes to Jesus' teaching on prayer, I think Jesus kind of "saves the best for last." In the final sentence he says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13 NRSV).

God knows that as disciples of Jesus Christ who are working for the transformation the world, what we need more than anything is the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide our hearts, minds, and actions. That's what we need to be praying for with perseverance and regularity. If we are going to pray anything beyond what Jesus has taught us to pray, then what we need to ask for, every day, is simply that God would give us the Holy Spirit.

- How might these teachings from Jesus influence the way we pray, as individuals and as a gathered body in worship?
- If God already knows our needs and has the best intentions for us, do we still need to remind God of what our needs are in our prayers?
- If not, then what purpose does sharing our joys and concerns before the pastoral prayer or other prayers of intercession serve? Does it serve our prayers to God, or does it primarily serve our need to share the joys and concerns of the community of faith?
- How can the way we pray help shape us into disciples who are transforming the world into the Kingdom of God?

As you consider your own responsibility as a pastor for teaching disciples of Jesus Christ how to pray for the transformation of the world, think about offering some church-wide or small group studies on prayer. There are many great resources from Cokesbury and Upper Room Books. One great resource I would highly recommend for teaching and leading intercessory prayer in your congregation is Mark Stamm's recently published book, [\*Devoting Ourselves to the Prayers: A Baptismal Theology for the Church's Intercessory Work\*](#) (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2015).

## Graphics & Resources

- [Prayer of Confession Based on Hosea 1:2-10](#)
- [Litany of Faith Based on Psalm 85](#)

**Living as Disciples Worship Series: WEEK 4**  
**Eighth Sunday After Pentecost – August 4, 2019**

## Calendar Notes:

July  
July 4      [Independence Day \(USA\)](#)

August  
All Month   [Back to School](#)  
August 6    [Hiroshima/Nagasaki Memorial](#)

## Planning for this Series:

The liturgical color is green.

End the series well, and preview your upcoming series well today.

Schools may be resuming within the next few weeks. Some start as early as the first or second week of August. See our Back to School resources for ideas and suggestions.

## Commentary:

### **Old Testament Stream: Prophetic Ministry—Calling and Working for Justice, Righteousness, and Peace**

Series 2: When God Speaks Judgment

Week 4: Judgment for Restoration

Last week, we entered into the pathos of Hosea and persons today who have faced the obliteration of the place and people they called home.

[This week](#), we enter into the pathos of God as God brings the word of judgment.

God speaks as a father of his child, a child who has determined to ignore the ways the father sought to lead. Many of us know what it's like to see a child walk away from paths that lead to life and abide in paths that seem to lead to stagnation or destruction. We know the disappointment, the frustration, the concern for the wayward child's welfare that never goes away.

In verses 3-4, the imagery becomes even more intimate. God had been for these people a father who lovingly and patiently taught his child how to walk, took the infant into arms, and stooped down to feed the child. In Israel, as in many near-Eastern cultures, the father would have used rope or bands of cloth for the child to hold as he led the child forward. These are the "bands of love" referred to in verse 4.

This text is not all cute and cuddly. The point of the poignant opening images is to highlight the heartbreak of God in the continual waywardness of God's child, Israel. Destruction and exile are the inevitable consequences of the people's actions (11:5-6). God does not bring this destruction in wrath, any more than a caring parent wrathfully brings the destruction that comes into the lives of wayward children (11:9).

We hear God's longing that the destruction the people had created for themselves and were walking into, even at that moment, would eventually lead them back home (11:10-11).

That never happened.

There was no homecoming.

There was only destruction, both in Israel and among the peoples taken away, from whom we never hear another word again. The typical Assyrian pattern of genocide against the peoples it conquered was, from all appearances, both applied and successful against the Israelis.

Assyria had left behind only the poorest of the poor and resettled the land with a variety of people from other nations they had captured, making it impossible for those left in this former kingdom to organize themselves into a viable political entity in its own right. Likewise, the religious practices of those who survived became more and more connected with the practices of the mix of the new surrounding cultures. "Samaritanism" became unrecognizable to and was considered as apostate by "Judaism" (the religion preserved in the Southern Kingdom of Judah and restored when the Judean exile ended).

### **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

In this series finale, we move from entering into the pathos of the people over their impending destruction to the pathos of God looking at the same scene.

Here we reach an even deeper place in theology. Last week, it was what is it like to face losing one's homeland or people. This week, it is what is like for God to lose God's own people, after centuries of striving with them to avoid that end. And then, ever deeper—what is it like for God to hope for a restoration and then see it not take place?

Hosea gives us clues from our human relationships—a father and his children—that begin to help us enter God's pathos. Here are some questions that may help you and your planning team begin to unpack these images in ways that reflect how your own congregation may experience them.

1. How do parents in your worshiping community teach their children to walk? Do you have young children and parents in your midst? Consider videotaping them as they help their children walk and showing the videos as this text is being read.
2. Who in your congregation or community is living with the pain of watching children wander into destruction? What do their faces look like? And what of the wandering children? Consider commissioning artworks that illustrate this pain.
3. What are the stories and images of a failed homecoming in your congregation and community? Do you have soldiers or prisoners or others who have returned from a difficult sojourn, only not to be welcomed or treated with hostility and suspicion?

4. How might you highlight God's internal struggle and the juxtapositions in this reading? Might you have two readers-- one reading the "positive" side; the other, the "negative" side? Or might you turn the reading of this text at least partly into an "antiphonal" reading, one side reading the positive; the other, the negative?

5. Explore together what it means that God's stated hopes, desires, and intentions to bring restoration (verses 9-11) were not fulfilled. Trust your team and the Holy Spirit to help you all discern whether and if so how to address this historical "elephant in the room."

This may seem an odd way to end a series, on such a serious and difficult note, and one that seems to lack any real resolution.

There was a kind of historical resolution—even if it came over seven centuries later. It was the ministry of Jesus, most of which took place and was based precisely in the most desolated region of the former kingdom of Israel, the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali, an area Isaiah refers to as "the land of deep darkness." This region had been battle-torn long before the destruction brought by the Assyrians. It was where Israel and its enemies often chose to pitch their battles, in part to avoid ruining the territory of Ephraim, where the Northern Kingdom's capital, Samaria, was located. It was there that Jesus announced, "The kingdom of God has drawn near." And it was to towns and villages in that region that Jesus sent his disciples in pairs to announce and display this good news.

This brings the series back to us, and to our particular ministries as a congregation, as a connectional church, and as individuals who are part of this congregation. And so to the last two questions.

6. How are we using our voices and ministries to speak into the places of devastation—and to the devastators—in our context and in our world?

Consider the answers to this part of the response to the Word today.

7. How might we and how will some of us commit to do that more and better than we now do?

Provide at least three, and no more than five, concrete next steps people can commit to, plus a blank space for people to put in other options and include these either on a paper form people can either place in the offering or as a text or Tweet to an established hashtag (perhaps #mynextstep) during the offering.

For the Great Thanksgiving this week, return to the standard "after Pentecost" form.

And send folks forth fed and readied by the God whose longing for restoration to be part of God's continuing restoration of all people and things.

## **Epistle Stream: Mission *in* the World, but not *of* It**

Our Life in Christ

Week 4: Out with the Old, On with the New!

This week's reading from [Colossians](#) builds on last week's focus on the all-sufficiency of Christ to save us, with a focus on just how decisive a break our baptism into Christ, and so being now in Christ, represents.

For those who are in Christ, it is to be "Out with the old, on with the new!"

The old: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, the desire for more and more (which Paul equates with idolatry!), anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech, and lying.

All of these, says Paul, are "earthly," and they must be more than simply reduced in their frequency as patterns or behaviors in our lives now. Paul's language is unflinching: "Put them to death!" (verse 5), "get rid of them" (verse 8) and "strip them off like clothes you never mean to wear again" (verse 9).

The new: seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, clothe yourself with the new self, a new self constantly being renewed in the knowledge of God and part of a new community where "earthly" divisions-- Gentile/Jew, circumcised/uncircumcised, European tribalists or "Eastern" militaristic "hordes"/civilized natives, slave/free—are no more, because Christ is all in all and for all.

Strongly consider reading verses 13-17. It is there Paul provides the list of "positive practices" to "put on" to correspond with the negative practices to be stripped off and put to death. Those practices include: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, the peace of Christ, thanksgiving, letting the word dwell in you richly, teaching one another and watching over one another in love, all in the name of Christ.

Both actions are necessary—out with the old, and on with the new, the stripping and the re-clothing. Adding kindness on top of malice only makes our kindness cruel. Adding forbearance on top of slanderous or abusive speech only makes us more hypocritical. Adding thanksgiving on top of wrath only comes across as self-congratulatory vengeance. First, we must strip off and put to death the old self with its practices (verse 9).

That is why the first baptismal vows may seem so negative. Renounce spiritual forces of wickedness, reject evil powers of this world, repent of sin, resist evil, injustice and oppression in every way they present themselves. These are not simply one-time actions to which we say yes in a one-time ritual. They are pledges to a whole life empowered by Christ and committed to continue all of these actions for the rest of our days.

The earliest Christian baptismal vows we still have speak of all of this in shorthand as, "Do you renounce Satan, and all his works, and all his pomps?"

In baptism, which first puts us into Christ, this stripping off is begun.

And in baptism, the new clothing of Christ we are now given to wear begins to become fitted to our bodies, as our bodies become fitted to the new community, the body of Christ, the church. We are re-clothed and learning to live with God and with all people in our right minds, building one another up in new habits of compassion, kindness, humility, and the rest.

This is what it means to accept the freedom and power Christ gives us, not simply to strip off the “old self with its practices,” but to put on the new self in union with the church Christ has opened to all peoples from everywhere, and so serve as Christ’s representatives in the world.

That such intense and intentional activity is required to eliminate the markers of the former self, being “of the world,” the way of life outside the Christian community, may be challenging to some ways of thinking and living in Christian congregations today.

Some may tend to equate such an energetic approach to ridding oneself of sinful practices with an “unhealthy obsession” with sin that may have the effect of giving such practices even more power in our lives. If Christian living is defined only by what it opposes or stops doing, such a criticism may be valid. But that is not what Paul is describing here. He is rather noting that these “earthly practices” — both personal and private (the first list, verse 5) and relational (the second list, verse 8) — are deeply endemic in the people of Colossae, including Christians, because they were in fact normal, daily practices in the way of life of that culture. It was in the air, the water, and everything they’d learned from infancy on up. To move beyond them, one has to reject them actively. Nothing in the culture would support such rejection, and everything would support the opposite. Christians would have to do it themselves in the power of risen Christ. No lesser power could make this possible!

While there might have been a time in our culture in the U.S. when we could at least pretend that cultural practices around us did not resemble those described as endemic to Colossae, it would certainly be difficult to make such a claim now, except perhaps in some well-isolated pockets. Paul was not calling Christians in Colossae into isolation, but he was calling them, as Christ calls us all, to a very different way of life and ministry—in the world, but not *of* it.

He was calling us to what our life in Christ must be if we are to live it to the fullest as God longs for us.

If you offered a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant last week, use the text again this week as a way to reinforce how the ritual of baptism and the vows we make are deeply connected with what it means to practice baptismal living: [Baptismal Covenant IV](#), the newer form created for [General Conference in 2008 \(Spanish\)](#).

## **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

Today is the end of this series. Next week marks the beginning of a new one.

As always, it’s important to end this series well and use this day to help generate excitement and interest in the one that will follow.

Today’s text gives you great opportunities to end strongly, with renewed commitments and paths for people to take their discipleship and ministries to the next level.

Building off of this entire book and series, we know that as we live into the flow of hearing and doing God’s will and bearing fruit, we come to know Christ more and more. As we know him more and more, we come to know the power of Christ in us the hope of glory, even in the face of suffering. And we are enabled to live and grow in Christ boldly, knowing that he is all-sufficient for our full salvation from the powers of sin and death.

And knowing this, we are enabled to keep letting go of former patterns of life that keep us caught in the sway of sin and death and put on new patterns of life that free us up to live more and more abundantly in this age and in the age to come.

Today focuses us on what to throw out, and what to put on, so both of these realities become realities in us more and more.

Consider starting the reading of this week's text (including verses 13-17) or the sermon with a video such as this one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6-ZkPvn3kg>. NOTE: You cannot legally display this video in worship without getting permission from its copyright holder, [Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana](#). Specifically, you will want to contact the marketing department.

If you use that video, you may want to make it clear you're not doing an ad for Goodwill—but that its portrayal of getting rid of old clothes and making room for new ones gets right to the heart of the message today and the good news about what Christ makes possible in us that culminates this series and Paul's letter.

To help you get ready for this service, and particularly the sermon, you and your team may find the following discussion questions helpful.

1. Share with one another positive, real-life examples of what “out with the old” (active rejection of sinful practices and systems) looks like in the lives of people you know. These may be people who are actively engaged in overcoming addictions or resisting the increasingly endemic consumerism and pornography of the wider culture. These may also be people who no longer use abusive speech and work to help others speak more respectfully.
2. Next, share some examples your team knows of people who are “putting on Christ” by taking up the specific practices listed in verses 13-17.
3. Who might you point to in your congregation or community who is clearly clothed in Christ? Who has lived into that clothing so that they are being remade into the image of Christ wherever they go, whatever they do? Ask one or more of them to share a brief testimony—live or on video—of how they have learned “out with the old, on with the new.”

If you can, interweave these real-life examples and testimonies into your sermon today.

And since today's text hooks into the baptismal themes raised last week, strongly consider letting one of the responses to the word today—and maybe the first-- be a reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant.

Move from reaffirmation into the Prayers of the People, particularly giving thanks in those prayers for people who are being enabled to say “out with the old, on with the new,” and interceding with those who are struggling to do so in one or more areas in their lives.

If you've reaffirmed the baptismal covenant, you only need include a call to the peace in the Invitation to the Table (you've already reaffirmed your rejection of sin!), followed by the Peace, Offering, and Great Thanksgiving. Then send folks forth to live out their life in Christ with all boldness, filled with the power of the Spirit.

And be sure to invite them to invite others to join them for your new series launch next week.

## Gospel Stream: Learning from the Master

Loving God and Neighbor

Week 4: "The Loves Never Stops Here"

Our calling is to become perfect channels of love for God and neighbor. We do this as we listen deeply to God and neighbor. Prayer is one of the chief ways we listen to God and so love God, but also a primary means through which God expresses God's love to us.

That's been our journey so far in this series.

[Today](#), the journey concludes with this final point about loving God and neighbor.

This love is love that never stops with ourselves. It always keeps reaching out, finding others to share it with.

Loving God and others as ourselves is how we become and remain rich toward God.

That is why greed (pleonexia in Greek, "the desire or hunger for more") is so destructive to our souls and communities.

The opposite of the love we're called and empowered for isn't hate.

It's greed.

Jesus warns about the destructive power of greed in today's gospel reading, just as Paul calls for us to "put greed to death" in Colossians.

Greed is so dangerous because it's so embedded in our basic cultural expectations.

We often don't even realize we're engaging in it, or that we're doing anything wrong.

Try reading the parable yourself without the word greed attached to it anywhere. Just hear the story itself:

"A rich farmer had terrific crops — so big he needed larger granaries to store them all. So he decided then and there what to do. He'd build bigger granaries so he would not have to worry about this anymore, and then he'd be able to retire."

What's wrong with that?

Everything, Jesus says.

Isn't that just reasonable — the way things should work in life?

"You idiot!," God addresses the man in the story. This is very strong language, and intentionally insulting!

And no. God is not critiquing this man for poor estate planning.

The point is clear enough. Life centered on attaining more, on making oneself rich and living off the excess, is death. True life, he says, consists of being "rich toward God."

"Look," Jesus says, "and be on guard against every form of greed" (Luke 12:15). That's how Jesus begins this story.

Not "be careful," or "watch out," but "be on guard."

"Being on guard" is the active watchfulness of a shepherd protecting the sheep, or a soldier on the wall of a city watching for any possible invaders. Be on the lookout for this while it's still far off. Don't let it come near. If it does, fight it away. There is no form of the ongoing desire for more that isn't addictive and deadly. As the Lay's potato chip commercials used to say, "You can't eat just one!"

But more than being on guard as a "defensive" posture, be "rich toward God" — εἰς θεὸν πλουτῶν—as an active posture. The phrase here is participial, implying ongoing activity as well. "Thus it is for the one gathering treasure for oneself and not being rich toward God." These aren't attitudes but actions. It's about what we do in our lives, about the very flow of the activities of our days. Are we storing things up for ourselves, gathering and getting, being consumers, primarily? Or are we using whatever we have gathered in, sharing the love, to promote God's kingdom in the life of the world?

***Richness toward God is measured in the outflow, not the ingathering.***

The love we've been given is never to stop with us.

Jesus presents being rich toward God as the attainable expectation for **every** disciple of his. This is about concrete learning (and unlearning) of specific patterns of behavior.

And the good news is, by God's grace and the kingdom's power, we can do this! We can find ourselves freed and help free others from the power of "the desire for more," and we can become instead channels of abundant blessing to others, rich toward God.

We can be persons and a people about whom it can be truly said, "The love never stops here!"

## **IN YOUR PLANNING TEAM**

It's series end, today. We've been on this journey of love for three weeks. And here at the end, we get a warning wrapping a great truth about loving God and neighbor. Greed halts our love and leaves us spiritually bankrupt. We can become and remain rich toward God by keeping love flowing ever onward and outward.

Jesus is clear we need to be engaged in both activities—guarding against greed, and being rich toward God. If we fail at the first, we'll never get to the second. If we don't pursue the second actively, we'll fall prey and fail at the first.

Here are some discussion questions to help you and your planning team.

1. Share stories in your team of people you know who are good at "being on guard against every form of the desire for more." Ask especially what they are doing to be "on guard" and what you and your worshiping community might learn from them.
2. Share stories about people you know who model being rich toward God, as Jesus describes it. How are people who clearly live "being rich toward God" learning and continuing to do this themselves? What can you and your worshiping community learn from such people?

3. Think together about how to design worship today so the flow moves from acknowledging our “desire for more” toward encouraging and celebrating both getting free from that desire and “being rich toward God.” Pay particular attention to acts of confession of sin and the language of the Sending. And set up a follow-up process during the coming week—either through in-person contacts or online groups—to continue to help people break what may be an almost automatic “greed addiction” and start building a life of richness toward God.

## Preaching Notes:

### Luke 12:13-32

“Be on guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Depending on where you sit on the great divide between wealth and poverty, this statement from our Lord and Savior may strike you as good news, or as condemnation. As a member of a middle class, two-income, American family, I find I must take Jesus’ words as a harsh criticism of my lifestyle. I must confess that like many people in my situation, my life is characterized by my abundance of possessions.

So this parable hits me squarely between the eyes. And if I’d rather not deal with it and try to pretend Jesus didn’t really mean it, I have only to read further in the Gospels to realize that this parable does not represent an isolated and exceptional example of Jesus’s attitude towards having an overabundance of possessions. Many of Jesus’s sharpest, most vivid, and unforgettable sayings are associated with this exact same thing. Consider, for example, Matthew’s report of Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) where Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19 NRSV) and “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25 NRSV).

Or think of Mark and the rich young ruler to whom Jesus replied, “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21 NRSV). But that young man turned away sorrowfully because, like me, he had an abundance of possessions. Then Jesus remarked on how difficult it was for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, and when the disciples were perplexed by his words, Jesus said, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:24-25 NRSV). Oh boy, do I know how the disciples felt when they rose up as one voice in protest! Remember how they put it? “Oh no, Lord! But that is impossible! Who then can be saved?” (Mark 10:26, my own paraphrase).

There can really be no doubt about it. Jesus did not see wealth as a reward for righteousness, or a sign of success. Quite the contrary. He saw it as a hindrance to loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, and a stumbling block for those seeking eternal life.

So what is the point of this teaching for those of us who seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, but whose lives are also characterized by abundance? Why is Jesus so negative about what might be called the American way and the American dream? Does he really expect us to give everything away and have nothing? I don’t think so. After all, when the woman lavished that

alabaster jar of perfumed oil on his feet and one of his disciples complained and said that the oil should have been sold and the money given to the poor, it was Jesus who said, "the poor you have always with you" (Matthew 26:11). Jesus obviously doesn't think that being poor is, in and of itself, a virtuous state or a free ticket to heaven.

I think Jesus makes his primary point at the end of the parable about the rich man. After God replies to the man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, where will they be?" Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

It seems to me that Jesus is not saying an overabundance of possessions is bad in itself. He's saying that if we aren't careful, we can end up using our entire lives taking care of them and thereby waste time we might have spent pursuing a relationship with God, who is the source of our lives and the one who holds the key to abundant living.

- How does the abundance of possessions held by the people in your congregation get in the way of their being in right relationship with God in Christ?
- How does caring for the church's "abundance of possessions" (building and furnishings, yard, parsonage, upkeep, salaried employees, etc.) get in the way of seeking transformation for the "least of these" in your wider community?
- In what ways do some people's abundance, especially in terms of the inequity of distribution of wealth around the globe, hinder the coming of God's reign? Give specific examples.

As we wind down this four-week series on "Living on Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World," I don't know about you, but I have personally found myself challenged to think about the choices I am making, the way I am living, and the way I do or do not practice Christian discipleship in my daily life. I wonder if I am helping to transform the world, or if I am just helping to maintain the status quo and my own place in it.

The first week I was challenged to consider whether I am prone to "doing for" instead of "being with" those that I meet who are in need. How is my discipleship leading me to be in relationship with the many "others" in my community?

The second week, the story of Mary and Martha challenged me to consider the long history of gender discrimination in Christian faith and within my own denomination. What have I done, by my witness and by my actions, to further the cause not just for American women, but to educate others about the plight of women around the globe? How is my discipleship seeking to transform the world by preaching good news to the poor and downtrodden, proclaiming release to women held in systems of submission and captivity, and setting at liberty my sisters who are oppressed?

The third week I was challenged to consider how I am praying for the transformation of the world. How do my personal prayers reflect my commitment to pray not just for myself and those I know and love, but for my neighbors around the world, especially those whom I consider enemies? I was also challenged to think about the power of prayer in the work of transformation.

And finally, this week, I was challenged to think about the stewardship of my own resources. How does my status as a privileged person with an abundance of possessions influence my interpretation of Jesus' many words about the dangers of wealth? How can I read this scripture lesson from the point of view of

those without abundance of possessions? And perhaps most importantly, how do my views about wealth and abundance of not just possessions, but food, shelter, and clothing, impede my relationship with God, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer?

## **Graphics & Resources**

- **THE GREAT THANKSGIVING FOR THE SEASON AFTER PENTECOST (ORDINARY TIME, OR KINGDOMTIDE)**