

#BeUMC / The People of God

Four Week Worship Series

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8 NRSV

*And are we yet alive,
And see each other's face?
Glory and praise to Jesus give
For His redeeming grace.*

"And Are We Yet Alive," verse 1, (United Methodist Hymnal 553)

Perhaps Charles Wesley's question is especially appropriate for such a time as this. Often used as a way of gathering for conference—whether annual, jurisdictional, or General—the hymn is designed to be a way of celebrating both the uniting power of Christ and the covenant we share as members of one body, the church we call United Methodist.

*What troubles have we seen,
What conflicts have we passed,
Fightings without, and fears within,
Since we assembled last. (verse 3)*

It is an honest hymn, a confession that it has been, continues to be, always is a struggle to maintain the unity that Christ calls us to. But here we are. Still the church, still doing ministry, still engaged in the worship of God through Christ, still carrying on the social witness and transforming disciple-making that seeks to resemble the kin-dom that Christ proclaimed.

*Let us take up the cross
Till we the crown obtain;
And gladly reckon all things loss,
So we may Jesus gain. (verse 6)*

There is a call in this hymn, a reminder that no matter the institutional question that might surround us, there is a higher obedience and a larger proclamation to be made. Even while we sort out our current debates, we can lift our eyes to a wider horizon and continue to be at work in the vineyards of our Lord as we seek to serve, to bring to salvation, and to welcome the outcast, to bind up the broken, and feed the hungry. We are not waiting for decisions to be made before we can be the church. We are the church at work in the world. We can celebrate our heritage, our unique way of working and being a part of the Wesleyan tradition. We can embrace what God has done and is doing through The United Methodist Church even today.

That is what is behind the People of God / #BeUMC campaign coordinated by United Methodist Communications. (Read more here: <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/people-of-god-campaign-invites-members-to-beumc>.) Discipleship Ministries has chosen to contribute to the campaign

by providing this four-week worship series. As with our Lectionary Worship Series, this series is designed to be a seed planting for you to shape to fit your setting. We begin with planning notes to help you think about the worship service as a whole with suggestions for the setting and the mood, visuals, and other worship elements. Then there are preaching notes to give the preacher a head start on putting the themes and chosen texts into sermon order. We also include music notes to help with congregational or choir and ensemble singing, liturgical resources, and even suggestions for children and worship and small-group tie-ins to the main theme.

In addition to the selected texts, this series is guided by two elements from the People of God / #BeUMC campaign. The first is a series of words that helps capture the essence of what it means to be a part of our tradition. These words are: *Resilient, Committed, Faithful, Jesus-seeking, Connected, Spirit-filled, Deeply rooted, Missional, Disciple-making, World-changing, Diverse, Generous, Justice-seeking*. The campaign features one of these words each month in 2022 and provides appropriate graphics and descriptions.

The second element borrowed from the campaign is a “messaging pillar.” These four messaging pillars are:

1. Disciple-making
2. Inclusion
3. Influence, Connection, and Impact
4. Experience of God through the UMC.

You can read a more complete explanation of the messaging pillars here:

<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/agencies/communications/church-and-conference-resources/people-of-god-campaign-new>

For this series, we divided up the words and assigned them to different weeks. It is possible, however, to switch them around if you can make them fit in different ways. We provide suggestions and reasons for the selections that were chosen, but you might see different connections and are free to do so.

The four pillars, however, form the framework for each week’s worship experience. While some may be more prominent than others, the intention is to let the four dimensions become the poles around which the sermon in particular, but also the whole worship service is built. This means there will be some repetition, but the repetition helps the worshipers see the pattern and lean into the experience of the theme.

The General Rules of United Methodism form the other frame around which this series is built. These rules are both simple and profound. The simplicity is in the statement; the profundity is in the living out of each. What could be simpler than “Do Good”? Yet, what could be more complex than attempting to live out that rule every day of one’s life? That is the call of the people called Methodist, however. This series is designed to help us celebrate how we do live that call as communities of faith around the world and to challenge us to go further, go deeper in our expression of faith in daily living.

As a companion to the rules, we set the guiding verse for the whole series as that famous statement from the prophet Micah, sometimes called the “great requirement” in Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord

require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” *Do no harm, Do good, and attend to the ordinances of God.* Simple, yet profound.

But wait, there are three general rules; and this is a four-week series. How does that work? The series concludes with a reminder that while our arena of action may be our local communities, our vision is always to transform the world. Thus, the vision statement of The United Methodist Church is one of the texts we will use in week four, “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” as we recall that statement from the journal of our founder John Wesley, “I look upon all the world as my parish.”

We invite you to consider celebrating who we are as United Methodists and participate in the campaign to proclaim #BeUMC.

Week 1: The People of God

Who Do No Harm

Resilient, Diverse, Justice-seeking

Do not plan harm against your neighbor who lives trustingly beside you. Do not quarrel with anyone without cause, when no harm has been done to you.

Proverbs 3:29-30, NRSV

PLANNING NOTES

Our series begins simply: Do no harm. Easy enough, right? Well, maybe not. This isn't a passive avoidance of intentionally doing harm to another person. This is asking us to be aware of how harm is caused in our multicultural and interwoven world and to understand how devastating even unintentional harm is for those who are already living on the margins of society and the world. That is why we chose the words *Diverse* and *Justice-seeking* for this first week. We begin our worship together by declaring that we are in solidarity with people from all walks of life, even those who are ignored or overlooked – the poor, the homeless, the abused, the forgotten.

The messaging pillar of **inclusion** seems obvious in this context. How can we move to a more inclusive stance in our worship and our mission? We begin by paying attention to the words we use for worship. How are we subtly excluding some people from our worship? What are the images that dominate our liturgy and our hymnody? What are the descriptions of who the beloved of God are as we gather together? Do they all look like us, or is there diversity in our images of community, even if not in our gathered congregation?

At the same time, we chose the word *Resilient* to align with this first theme of our series. Being resilient is about keeping our focus even through changes and difficulties. Doing no harm sometimes requires changes in behaviors and patterns of living. While change is always difficult, resilient people of God can incorporate change without complaint, while maintaining the mission of doing no harm and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Worship can issue a challenge to, as Discipleship Ministries likes to say, “#SeeAllthePeople” (<https://www.seeallthepeople.org>).

Here we incorporate the pillar of **influence, connection, and impact** by understanding that the changes we embrace—inclusion of and hospitality to the other—will need to radiate out from our local congregation into the wider community around us. We are the yeast that leavens the whole lump of dough; we are the salt that gives flavor to the whole world. Worship issues a call that continues beyond the benediction into how we live in the world around us, doing no harm.

The best way to do this is by telling our own stories. We have been welcomed into this family; we have experienced God through the love and support of the body of Christ. So, tell that story. Let there be a witness within the worship experience of someone who was endured harm and has been released by the grace of community and inclusion. The pillar, “**Experience of God through the UMC,**” is a testimony to how transformative doing no harm really is in the lives of individuals and communities. How is the world around us more whole because we have chosen to avoid harm and undo the harm inflicted on people and the environment? What stories of healing what has been broken can we tell? steps What

steps are being taken to avoid causing damage to the ecosystem that we can share as we gather for worship this week? How have we cleaned up what has been harmed in our neighborhood?

Doing no harm is not passive avoidance of behaviors, but an active awareness and response to systems and attitudes that inflict harm on a regular basis, without thought or regret. A part of our invitation to the world, to our neighbors, is to come to this understanding and experience of doing no harm as we are made into followers of Jesus Christ. The fourth messaging pillar of the people of God campaign is ***Disciple-Making***, and that is what we are always about. That is what worship does for us as we gather week by week; we are being shaped into examples of Christ at work in the world. The influence of that shaping is not simply an internal change; we are not made into disciples for our own sake, but for the world's sake.

PREACHING NOTES

(*Please start your sermon preparation by reading the planning notes first. The design outline and intent of the series are found there and are essential for the sermon as well. The campaign words and messaging pillars are outlined there and are useful for sermon preparation.)

As mentioned in the planning notes, there is a surprising simplicity in this first week of the #BeUMC worship series. Surprising and deceitful, to be honest. On the surface, it is easy to proclaim, “Do No Harm” to the gathered and online congregation. Just avoid hurting anyone. Just . . . well, you know, don’t be a jerk. You’re like a parent in the carpool line at school leaning out the open window shouting at the child running into the open doors— “Make good choices!” Appropriate, perhaps, but not terribly transformative.

So where do we start? You could start with the rule. Spend some time unpacking what “Doing No Harm” means in both an active and a passive sense. Start simple and get more complex as you examine what it means to first be aware of the harm that is happening all around us all the time and to which we have become blind to or accepting of. Then consider how to avoid adding to the harm by how we have come to live our lives. What abuse are we contributing to by how we shop and how we eat and how we move about in our world? Who is being harmed so that we can enjoy the pleasures of our abundant society? It is sobering to consider, troubling, to say the least. There is certainly a need to make folks aware of the implications and the impact of our lifestyles on the wider world. People need to be aware of communities that are marginalized and harmed by a majority that manages not to see its privilege. The reality is, however, that many have tuned out this message, this approach, as being too uncomfortable to hear. Some efforts to raise awareness of the effects of racism, for example, have been met with a determination to avoid the conversation altogether.

So, where should you start, preacher? You could start with the text. Proverbs is an interesting book. It is difficult to preach without sounding like you are moralizing. And it lends itself to simplicity, just like the general rule itself. But what if you give the advice in Proverbs 3:29-30 a little context? Jump back to the beginning of the chapter and read the “why.” Why are we told to avoid harm? That’s what the first couple of verses of the chapter tell us.

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.

(Proverbs 3:1-2, NRSV)

For length of days. Is this a promise of longevity? That if we . . . what? Not forget the teaching? Keep the commandments, then we will have longer days? That would be great. Wouldn't it? Longer days and many years. Now, this is a message that would sell really well out there in the world.

Except we know it isn't true. Or isn't true in the way we might first think it is true. We've all performed too many funerals for keepers of God's commandments to state that it is a prescription for longer lives. We've sat with families as days slipped away in the care of their loved one and known that their days aren't any longer than yours or anybody else's for that matter; including those who wouldn't know a commandment if it wore a kilt and played the pipes in front of them.

So, what does it mean, then? If it isn't about giving you more hours in a day or more years in your life, then what is it promising? Most of the commentaries say it is promising eternity. It's about heaven, they argue. It's about the kingdom of God and the invitation to dwell there forever.

And who can argue with that? Or better yet, who wants to? That is a promise that has sustained God's followers for centuries. The idea that eternity in heaven, however we want to depict that realm, is on offer to those who keep the commandments has invited folks to live godly lives throughout history.

Proverbs is about wisdom, divine or holy wisdom that shifts the focus from the dog-eat-dog, just getting by, only-in-it-for-myself kind of wisdom to something higher, something broader, something deeper than what we sometimes settle for in this world. The ability to surrender to a higher presence, to set self aside and seek the good of all or at least some more, is indeed keeping the commandments of God. And the motivation of heaven is and has been a powerful one.

Yet, I'm not sure that Proverbs, chapter three, is talking about heaven. It seems much more about this life, this world, this walk, than it does about some someday yet to come. The result of following this wisdom, of keeping these commandments is that we will become people of good repute. That's not a heavenly quality. That's a now kind of thing. We want to find favor with God and people. We want to be known by God and people. We do.

The other promise is that we will find straight paths. God will make straight our paths. Which doesn't, I don't think, mean that God will run interference for us, keeping the bad things out of our way, smoothing out the potential bumps in the road, keeping the corners, the intersections to a minimum. No, that isn't the promise. Rather when we choose to walk in the wisdom of God instead of our own wisdom, we will find contentment. We will find joy, even on the bumpy parts, even as we stand at the intersections agonizing over which direction would honor God more. The joy is in the attempt to honor. The joy is in the desire to be where God is, to walk in God's way, to be filled up with the fullness of God.

Which, not to make a circular argument, is how it all starts anyway. By filling ourselves up with the fullness of God, Proverbs tells us to wrap ourselves in loyalty and faithfulness—to mark ourselves as those who love as God loves. Loyalty is the translation of *hesed*, which is sometimes translated as *steadfast love*. It is an attribute of God. Faithfulness is also a God quality. So, we wrap loyalty and faithfulness around our necks like a woolen scarf on a frigid day. We write them on the tablets of our hearts—whether Android or Apple. Windows tablets anyone? Windows might be better because, through these attributes, we see God, and we see God in what we do or say, how we live life each day and each hour of the day.

There aren't enough hours unless each hour is filled with the presence of God, the awareness of God— unless each hour is an opportunity to acknowledge God and God's claim on our lives, God's praise on our lips, God's joy in our hearts. So maybe the promise is not for more hours in the day to fill, but for more fullness for the hours we have, for the days we have. Maybe the promise isn't an endless number of years in this life, but a life full of years of endless presence and joy. The abundant welfare promised in Proverbs 3:2 isn't about safety or security or ease or comfort, but about the sustaining presence of God in all our doing, all our living, all our being. Our souls are cared for because we live in love, we live in presence. We live in joy.

In the end, then, not doing harm is about living in and expressing what it means to live in the kingdom of God, the kin-dom of God – that place of fellowship and connection. Not doing harm is about acknowledging that any we would cause harm to, or any we would allow to continue being harmed are a part of our own family, our own body. Harm done to any is harm done to ourselves, to the wholeness we seek as the community of faith.

There is nothing passive about the General Rule to "Do No Harm." We are called to seek out ways to end the harm that is caused to God's people for whatever reason; the harm caused to all of creation for whatever reason. It calls for a vigilance that is beyond any of us individually, but within the realm of possibility for all of us collectively - when we are empowered and equipped by the Spirit to be alive every hour of every day for the length of days we are given.

Week 2: The People of God

Who Do Good

Missional, Committed, Connected, Generous

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:9-21 NRSV

PLANNING NOTES

Sometimes, it is hard to deny the simplicity of the gospel. Do good. What could be more direct? You could argue that this is one of those “Nike” messages: “Just do it!” But be ready for the follow-up question: “Do what?” Sometimes the good that we are to do seems obvious; at other times, we have to think and plan and wonder what we can do that is good but that also doesn’t cause harm elsewhere. It gets a bit tricky. We have to pay attention.

However, it is important that this week doesn’t become a burden on the congregation. Yes, there is always more good we could do, and we need reminders that we are called to be at work in the world. But we are hoping that the thrust of this worship moment can be one of celebration of the good we have been doing all along. That’s why we chose the word **missional** for this week’s worship. *Missional* can refer both to the focus of making disciples that drives all the ministries of the church and the various acts of service in which the church is engaged on a week-by-week basis. This might be a time for a mission inventory. Gather a list of active mission efforts the church is involved with. Ask around; there may be Sunday school groups or covenant groups that have undertaken a mission that they haven’t told anyone about. What mission efforts do the preschool parents engage in without complaint? Of course, you should not forget whole-church missions such as working at the food bank or collections of various kinds. Ask the United Methodist Women how many mission efforts they can name that their various circles and members have undertaken. Check with the youth group or the older adults. Who are the mission-minded individuals who are always rolling up their sleeves in the community? Some of them may be engaged because of their position or office; many others are involved because they care about their town.

But what do you do with the list? What do you do for the missionaries to your neighborhood? You thank them, bless them, encourage them, and offer to support them. Why not have a consecration service, but

instead of commissioning a group to go on a once-a-year mission trip, commission those active individuals to keep doing what they are already doing, but now with the blessing and sending of the church? For that matter, what if you commissioned the whole congregation? Have everyone kneel or bow before the Table of the Lord and receive a sending blessing to go and do good in the world—in their world. It might be a powerful reminder that we are called to use our ***influence, connection, and impact*** not just on special occasions but every day.

Many churches pray the Covenant Prayer (*United Methodist Hymnal* 670, “Go Forth for God”) at the beginning of the year as a way of reminding themselves that they are to do good wherever and whenever they can. Maybe this would be a good time to bring that prayer out again as a way of reminding ourselves that we are **committed** and are living out that commitment daily.

It is important to emphasize that our influence is stronger when we work together. The gospel stands in opposition to the individualizing thrust of our society. We are a people who are **connected**. The very definition of our denomination is a connectional church. Therefore, to be true to our heritage and beliefs, our ***experience of God through The United Methodist Church*** is communal. The “we” needs to be the driving force more than the “me.” As you celebrate the mission efforts of your church, always include an invitation to join in and join with. The “more the merrier” might be one motivation, but it is more profound than that. It is the admission that, for most of us and most of the time, we experience God through others rather than simply on our own.

Disciple-making, then is not only a one-on-one experience but a corporate, shared experience of growth and a deepening of understanding and acceptance. We find it easier to focus on ***inclusion*** when we remember that we have been included and that we would be less than we are if there were not the whole body of Christ around us.

One aspect of mission work that shouldn’t be overlooked is the giving that we do each week. The offering time isn’t simply a commercial break, but an opportunity to worship God through **generous** hearts and hands. Even if you have gone to online or retiring offering patterns since the pandemic, be sure and take a moment to lift up giving as an act of worship and a way of doing good. Not all of what we give goes out of the building; we all acknowledge that. But if our building is one of the tools that we use to do mission work and to do good in our community, then the maintenance of the facility and the staffing of the ministries of the church is doing good. Let’s give thanks for generous souls to help maintain all that we do in the building and in the community at large.

PREACHING NOTES

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Here again, “Do Good” can be oversimplified. It is not always as easy as it seems. The good often eludes us, challenges us, requires much from us that we might not be prepared to give. Yet, there it is, embarrassing in its simplicity. “Do good.” End of sermon? Well, maybe. That might be memorable, don’t you think? As the gathered throng shuffles into silence, waiting for a word from the Lord, from the one they came to hear. And the preacher strides to the pulpit or the center of the chancel, or into the aisle

to be among the people, or gazes intently into the camera livestreaming into homes all over the community if not the world. And into that silence, the voice comes: “Do good.” This is followed by an intense stare and then a quick return to a seat. You better believe people would be talking about that sermon for a long time.

But talking about and incorporating the sermon into their lives aren’t necessarily the same things. So, there is more work to be done. At the very least, reread the text from Romans. This sounds like a half-time speech in the locker room of the team that is behind. Paul is rallying the troops, stirring up the zeal, getting folks ready to get on out there and do good! But there is really more going on here than a pep talk for everyone to go and do with they would have done anyway. What Paul is describing in these verses, and what the General Rule itself is implying, is that doing good isn’t how most folks live in this world. It isn’t even how we live most of the time, if we’re honest with ourselves. The society we have created runs by a different set of rules.

“I’ll get you, my pretty! And your little dog too!!” Okay, quick, name that quote. Of course, we all recognize the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*. Try this one: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all” (Romans 12:17). A little buzzkill there, don’t you think? We were all cackling in our heads, rubbing our hands, and laughing the sinister laugh with the Wicked Witch. We might even have been plotting a little bit, might even have selected our designated “my pretty” to go and get.

We seemed to be wired that way, or at least have been shaped that way by the culture in which we live. We want people to pay. We want to get even. We want people to suffer the way we have suffered. Right? Well, no we don’t. But it seems to be a mindset that grabs us every now and then. As we watch the tit-for-tat political campaigning, we get caught up in it. Our candidate has to be strong, has to attack, or else we will wonder if that candidate can hold the office. The mud must be slung; the knives must come out; or we will wonder about our candidate’s spine. We will wonder about power. We will wonder.

What we need to wonder is whether there is another way to live—another way to be. And of course, there is. Paul describes it in this text. Paul lists the ways we are called to live in the world today; the ways we are called to live if we want to be known as followers of Jesus the Christ. We need to be guided, not by the ways of the world, but by the example of Christ. And even though we are familiar with these words, the attitudes and the lifestyles presented here would still be shocking in our world today.

After making a general statement or setting the bar as high as he could, Paul then gets specific. The general statement, which is also specific in a way, is “let love be genuine.” That is pretty amazing when you think about it. “Don’t fake it,” he says. Don’t go halfheartedly into this loving thing. Make it real, make it sincere, put your whole self into it. Love genuinely. Got it?

“Now,” says Paul, “Let’s get specific: *hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good.*” He divides our responsibilities into inside and outside, and this is an inside kind of statement. One of the problems we have being Christians in the world today is a tendency to do inside work outside and to do outside work on the inside. We need to explain what that means.

Paul is establishing rules of behavior for the community of faith. This is how we are trying to be; this is who we are trying to be. He describes life within the community in dynamic, powerful kinds of ways. We are connected; we are accountable; we are invested in one another's lives. This difficult work of hating evil and holding fast to good is an inside job. This isn't a call to go and change the world; this is a call to clean our own house. We are called to not let the harm the world allows creep in around the edges of our thinking. We are called to root it out, to stand against it, to call one another to a higher standard. We are to be in the business of transforming lives.

Now, Paul is quick to point out, the methodology for this change is always love. Our tools are respect and honor and patience and prayer—not judgment and punishment and vengeance. But, again, we put our whole selves into this process. We pour ourselves out for the community, for those within the community who are struggling to learn how to live and to love as Christ calls us to love. And we never give up. Here is where that counting thing needs to be remembered. You know, “How many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” “More than you can count,” says Jesus. Paul says it like this: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord” (verse 11),

As an aside, that last phrase could be read another way. Translation from the original Greek is a difficult process, partly because they didn't use punctuation or spacing when they wrote (paper was a precious resource). They also used abbreviations on occasion. The word in question is “*krs*” — which is here interpreted to be “*kurios*” or Lord, but might have been “*kairos*” or time. Paul might have been saying, “Don't wait; seize the opportunities that arise, serve the time.” Either way, serve the Lord or seize the opportunities would fit in this context, so why not take it to mean both! Get to work serving the Lord as we work in the lives of those within the community who need our attention.

But lest we think our work is all inwardly focused, according to Paul, he quickly moves us out. First of all, we are called to pay attention to the threshold. In fact, it might be argued that the real work of the church doesn't take place inside, or even outside, but on the threshold. The life of the church is found in how the guest is welcomed and included. The spirit of the church is felt by the strangers who find themselves in need or simply in proximity to the church and are caught up in the generous hospitality that draws them in.

Now, having opened the door, Paul runs out with enthusiasm and opportunity, dragging us along in his wake. From verse fourteen on, we are now living in the world around us. Notice there is no crusading spirit for living in the world. There is only service and love and honor and respect. The same tools we took up on the inside, we use it with even more tenderness. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep; associate with the lowly; and then we begin to avoid the whole vengeance thing.

What is behind this idea from Paul is that we are going to get hurt. That's the part we struggle with. I'd be willing to do a whole lot more mission stuff if it didn't cost me so much. Right? I'd be more willing to share faith, to trust my neighbor, to sacrifice for those who need it if I didn't get taken advantage of; if I didn't get the rug pulled out from under me; if I knew everything was going to work out to my advantage, or at least to cause me minimal damage. But that has never been the promise. Safety was never high on Jesus' list of concerns. Why else would Paul be telling us how to respond if he was assuring us that things never went wrong?

No one said this stuff was going to be easy. Only that it is worth it. Living in harmony, even with those who don't want to live in harmony with us, is worth the effort it takes. Loving is worth the effort and the

rejection we receive. Hope is worth the effort, even when despair seems so much more logical. All of which is to say: doing good is worth it for its own sake.

This brings us at last to those coals: You have to wonder whether it would have been better if Paul hadn't said that bit about the burning coals. It seems to lead to more malicious glee than it ought. "Killing them with kindness" is still killing them. But maybe what he was really saying was that the cold pleasure we take in getting revenge is nothing compared to the warm joy of serving or healing or helping. So, go ahead, heap some coals. It'll do us all some good!

Week 3: The People of God

Who Attend to the Ordinances of God

Faithful, Spirit-filled, Deeply rooted

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.

1 John 5:1-4 NRSV

PLANNING NOTES

After two weeks of arguing that what seemed simple was actually more complex than it appeared, we now change gears and assure the worship planning team that “attending to the ordinances of God” isn’t as difficult as we might think. So hang in there.

If you became familiar with the General Rules since Bishop Rueben Job published the book *Three Simple Rules*, then you may be wondering where this one came from. Actually, the better question is, “How did Bishop Job get from ‘Attend to the ordinances of God’ to ‘Stay in love with God’ as his third general rule?” Well, he was interested more in the object than in the process. You can’t argue with Bishop Job that the intent of the third rule was to cultivate a lively passion for God and for the world that God created. Wesley also wanted the people called Methodist to stay in love with God, but he was concerned about the means for doing so. The ordinances of God were those things that Wesley identified as being required of God’s people. He categorized them into works of piety and works of mercy. We have come to call them the inward and outward spiritual disciplines. The inward disciplines were those things that we would do within the body of Christ, sometimes alone, but more often in small groups. These disciplines would include things like worship and Bible study, prayer, and fasting. The outward disciplines were things that were done in the wider community, visiting the sick or imprisoned, giving to charity, and caring for others in a variety of ways. These together were called the *means of grace*.

Grace, then, is how we experience then return God’s love. So, these ordinances were all about moving us to love God more by disciplined action. Therefore, the **faithful** people of God are those who keep these disciplines, not in a regimented or rote fashion, but as a way of expressing and experiencing love for God and neighbor, which Jesus named as the highest law of all.

Worship is one of the works of piety, or disciplines, but it can also be a means of presenting or encouraging others. Here again, a major purpose of this series is to celebrate what is already going on in the life of the church. Take the opportunity to lift up the various Bible study opportunities and bless those who have been faithfully attending and leading those efforts. Identify the prayer warriors in the life of the church, those who can be called upon to lift up the church and its ministries in regular prayer. Perhaps you could encourage others to do so by handing out prayer cards and inviting the whole congregation to pray the printed prayer at a specific time each week.

For some, these disciplines will feel like a burden, a duty to be performed. For those folks, some encouragement to consider a different approach would be helpful. Ask them to consider works of mercy as a way of disciplining themselves and allowing others to help keep them on track. **Spirit-filled** refers to being in tune with the Spirit in whatever activities we do. It is about being opened and being guided into new experiences, about seeing in new ways, about finding deeper connections with those inside and outside our Christian community. All that we do as the body of Christ is done to widen our reach, to invite others to come and know what we know and experience what we experience. Finding ways for people with different ways of engaging the world to experience God's love is a way of **Inclusion**, of making sure that not everyone has to do the same or act the same or think the same in order to be a part of the whole.

Our goal, of course, is to make these disciplines, these ordinances, a part of our lives and a part of the witness of the community of faith in daily living. We look to those among us for whom prayer is a way of life—those who have dedicated themselves to Bible study, those who are **deeply rooted** in the activities of faith and have become examples and mentors to us all. They, like all of us, are **disciple-making** by how they live their lives. They are making themselves disciples and, by their witness, are making others disciples around them. Through them, we have had an **experience of God through The United Methodist Church**, and we rejoice in that. How might we feature these saints among us during worship—even those who may not seek it? We don't want to embarrass them, but we do want to thank them for their witness and for the love of God that radiates from them. We want to celebrate their **influence, connection, and impact** on so many lives simply because they have been faithful to the ordinances of God.

Worship this week is about reaching out to God in ways that are beneficial to us and to those around us. This is about building up the body that we might all know God's love in our daily lives. Send folks out with a challenge to continue to seek God's grace by regular attention to these ordinances, providing direct resources for fulfilling that challenge. Staying in love with God, we can discover, takes discipline, but it is really easier than we think.

PREACHING NOTES

(*Please start your sermon preparation by reading the planning notes first. The design outline and intent of the series are found there and are essential for the sermon as well. The campaign words and messaging pillars are outlined there and are useful for sermon preparation.)

"For the love of God is this, that we obey God's commandments" (1 John 5:3). It makes sense that Bishop Job would translate this third general rule into "Stay in Love with God." That is certainly what the ordinances are about, the disciplines as we know them. They are all about love—the love of God that is also expressed in the love of neighbor. Jesus taught us that. It is two sides of the same coin, this loving thing.

The problem is not that we don't know that. We've heard that since we began in the faith at whatever point in our personal history. We know that we are to love God, and we know we are to love neighbor. We know. What we don't know, or at best are confused about, is what love is. Or rather we don't know how we're supposed to love God. Love in our culture is . . . messy. Emotional, flighty, dependent on

circumstances, subject to our moods and desires—love is messy. At least as we see it expressed, sung about, and performed in our dramas and comedies. And yes, we’ve explained it before, what love is, *agape* love. But it bears repeating and then talking about the discipline of loving.

So, let’s back up into chapter four of this first letter of John and explore this love thing a little more deeply.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ... Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:7-12, 17-19, NRSV

Too much? Not enough, to be honest. Read all of chapter 4. Better yet, read the whole letter. The whole gospel. It will take a lot to grasp this discipline of love we are called to embrace with our whole being.

It is true that these verses seem like old news—like we’ve heard it all before. But set aside what you thought you knew, what you thought you heard in these verses before, and look again. Start with that most basic of declarations: God is love. Amazing, really, when you think about it. John could have said, “God is power.” Or God is justice. He could have said, “God is unknowable, the ineffable mystery of the universe.” He could have said almost anything, but he didn’t. Instead, John chose this little word that trips us up on a regular basis. “God is love.”

Not, “God loves,” or “God is the source of love.” But “God is love.” The fundamental essence of God is love. It boggles the mind, to say the least. But John isn’t done with this one earth-shattering statement—earth-stabilizing statement—earth-defining statement. Whatever. He doesn’t stop with one. “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us.” What? Wow. “God lives in us. Because love lives in us.” Not *we love*, or *we are the source of love*, but *love lives in us*.

And—and this is one of those ands you’ll need to hold onto your hats for—John says, “If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

Okay, we were on board there for a while. It sounded good, promising, even possible. Until that word *perfected* got tossed in. “His love is perfected”—stop there, and we can go along. God is perfect; that is a part of our fundamental theology; it is what we think about God; God is perfect, and God’s love can’t be anything else but perfect. So, stop there, John, and we are doing just fine.

But he didn’t stop there. God’s love is *perfected in us. In us*. See, now we know John is a bit messed up here. God’s love might be perfected in us, in a perfect world, with perfect circumstances, and if we stopped being human. Then maybe, ok. Superman, Wonder Woman, maybe. But little old me, little old you? No way.

We know it can't be true because we've hurt too many times. We've been wrong too many times. We've been hurt, been lost, been rejected, tossed aside. Hardly perfect. We've stumbled through vows and commitments; we've run out of hope and energy. We've fallen short. Perfect? Not even close.

It's a process. That's what our founder John Wesley wrote. We are "going on" to perfection in love. We are on the way. Maybe. But if that's true, then we must be taking the scenic route. We seem a long way off. We don't grasp this love thing very well. We have trouble with the people close to us, the people we're supposed to love, let alone the rest of the world—the ones unlike us; the ones that disturb us; the ones who just seem way too different from us. How in the world are we supposed to love them? Because who is to say that they will love us back?

Isn't that how it is supposed to work? Don't we love in order to be loved? Aren't there winners and losers in this love game? Unless it isn't really a game. There is no score to keep, no statistics to measure. No winner, no loser. There is just love. Love for the sake of loving. Love in order to allow God to take up residence in us. Love in order to be like God.

What is perfect love anyway? Is it love that doesn't make any mistakes? No, not as long as we are human; mistakes are a part of the design. Is it love that never is rejected? No, even God's love has been and continually is rejected. Is it love that never suffers, never hurts? Christ on the cross shows us that perfect love is love willing to suffer for those who are loved.

John seems to be saying that perfect love is love that never ends. "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world" (verses 17-18), Love lasts into eternity. Love never gives up—even when it hurts, even when it seems futile.

"Perfect love casts out fear." What does that mean, I wonder? Maybe what it means is that when we allow God to do the loving in and through us, then there won't be a time when we will need to wonder if we should love, should act out of love. We won't be afraid if there is enough love to go around. We won't be afraid that our love is inadequate in the face of indifference, or brokenness, or evil. Because it isn't our love in the end. It is the God who abides in us that enables us to love at all. We won't be afraid of running out because we know an inexhaustible source. Beloved, let us love.

These are the commandments that we are called to keep; these are the ordinances that will help us stay in love with God. Wesley knew that this would take time. Wesley knew that this would be a process. Wesley knew that we would have to work at it day by day, every day of our lives, and, even then, we would sometimes feel so far away that we'd lose sight of what love looks like.

Yet, John says that we will conquer the world with this love, this discipline, with this faith. Conquer the world. The world inside of us and the world all around us. That is what we are working toward as we attend to the ordinances of God.

Week 4: The People of God

For Whom the World is Our Parish

Jesus-seeking, Disciple-making, World-changing

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:2-4, NRSV

PLANNING NOTES

This final week is a little bit different. Rather than a general rule guiding our worship, this week it is an environment or an arena within which we do our work, we build our community and we make disciples. **Disciple-making** is the heart of our work, of course. But you remember that the purpose of making disciples is not to strengthen the church. Rather, we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The most famous verse in the gospels, John 3:16, reminds us that all of this was done, not because God so loved the church, but because God so loved the world. Too often we approach the world as though it was in opposition to the church. "Church is good; world is bad," we think. But it is the world into which we are called.

John Wesley was on his way to the new world to carry the gospel to any and all when he wrote in his journal the words that we have remembered as the "world is my parish." He had a heart for the church and worked to shore up the faith of the believers with his system of classes and bands in the Methodist movement. But he knew from the outset that this faith was not one of being cloistered from the world but engaged in it. From the beginnings of our denomination, we have been engaged in world-changing. This isn't a new thing or a progressive versus a traditional thing. It is the very essence of who we are as United Methodists.

This week as we conclude our #BeUMC worship series, it is time to celebrate the difference that we have made in the world around us—whether that be local stories from our own congregation's history or a part of the denominational story that brought forth colleges and hospitals, schools, and care facilities of all kinds. How has your congregation or the churches in your area advocated for the poor and homeless in your towns and cities? What changes have you brought about to the world around you? Sometimes these are small things, but they are worth celebrating. What partnerships have you engaged in – with schools or service organizations, charitable groups, or community institutions to help make your part of the world something that more resembles the kin-dom of God? How have you used your **influence, connection, and impact** to bring about change? Even if the work is unfinished, or ongoing, it is worth celebrating as the church being the church, reminding ourselves that ministry is happening even now.

Who in your neighborhood needs an advocate? Here again, you could celebrate the work you are already doing for **inclusion**, or issue a challenge to the congregation to join in providing a welcoming space for those who are forgotten or neglected around you. Who do you lift up in your intercessory prayers? It is good, of course, to include members of the congregation who need special prayers. But prayers can be outward-focused as well, praying for the communities around you who aren't like those in the sanctuary.

We who are **Jesus-seeking** need to be reminded that he told us that we would find him when we reach out to help that society calls "the least of these." And it has been the practice of the people called Methodist from the very beginning to seek ways to make a difference in the world, to "save the lost," as Wesley would say, to gather up any and all who are beloved of God and ensure that they know there is a place for them in the church of Jesus Christ. And we discover that it is in this seeking of those around us that we find God most powerfully. This is who we are, this is how we **experience God through the United Methodist Church**.

PREACHING NOTES

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Isaiah reminds us that God's intentions have always been larger than just us. The *us* of the people of God are the means not the end. Or, as Paul says, "in Christ God was reconciling the world" to God's self (2 Corinthians 5:19). "All the nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord's house," says Isaiah. Or "God so loved the world" writes John in the gospel, in that verse that has captured the imaginations and hearts of disciples of Jesus Christ all over the world.

It might be an interesting exercise to scan throughout the scriptures and find the many places where the intentions of God for the world are depicted. Or maybe we can just settle down here in this familiar text from Isaiah and hear these words anew. "This is an Advent text," you're thinking. And that's true; we trot out these verses during the season of watching and waiting, of expectation and hope. That's what makes these verses perfect for this summation week of our #BeUMC series. This text is a reminder of the perspective we need to do the work of the church, the work we have defined as "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." That is an ambitious task, to be sure. One might even say it is a bit grandiose. After all, we are one small church in a very big world. How in the world, excuse the reference, can we be expected to have an impact on the whole world? We can barely transform our own congregation, let alone our neighborhoods, the world just seems ... out there. Out of our reach. Out of our power. Out of our influence.

"I know," says Isaiah. "Believe me, I know." But listen again. Read again. There is hope and possibility in these words. There is a call within our reach in these words. Listen again: "In days to come . . ."

Notice the passive tense? We have trouble with that. We are doers. Especially in busy times. We want to be doing, to be moving, to be deciding. But all this is not our work. This mountain raising and nation-calling work isn't ours. It is God's. It's going to happen; we can count on that. In fact, that is our job, counting on it—holding on to the hope, to the conviction that God is in control. And if you don't think

that takes effort, then you haven't really tried it. When the world around you has given up on hope, holding fast is taking a contrary stand. To say that you believe that there can be such a thing as peace is to make a radical declaration. To live confidently, that despite all evidence seen with the eyes and heard with the ears, you will trust with your whole life that healing and wholeness is around the corner.

So, why is it so important to hold on to hope? Why not just be surprised with the rest of the world? Well, we could say that living in hope is a better way to live. We could say that a life filled with confidence and joy is much more rewarding and satisfying than one shaped by cynicism and distrust.

But that isn't Isaiah's argument. Isaiah simply announces that there will come a time when the nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord. There will come a time when people will want to learn God's ways and will want to walk in God's path. And he says that this will happen because there is teaching happening, there is the Word being proclaimed. This will happen because there are those who will welcome. This will happen because there are hosts on the mountain of the Lord.

That's us. Company's coming. That's what Isaiah is telling us. Yes, in part, we know that it is the Word made flesh that comes to dwell among us. We know that the King is coming. And we spent a season making ready by preparing him room so that this time he isn't turned away at the inns of our lives, left to sleep in a feed trough out back where no one but some smelly shepherds and wacko wise guys from out of town drop in on him. We know that this is a part of our task—not just in the Advent season, but all of the time—to make room for the Christ who dwells within, among us now, to pay attention to the savior who is among us in the breaking of bread and the waters of baptism, to welcome the one who brings us healing and hope and joy and forgiveness and reconciliation. We know that; we remember that; we rehearse that over and over and over because we forget. Or we live as though we have forgotten. So, we make ready for the one who comes to dwell among us again and again.

But Isaiah isn't satisfied with just that, as important as it is. There is a world out there hungry to learn, and they just might be beating a path to our door. There is a world out there dying for justice, and they might be huddled under our awning right now. There are wanderers who have strayed down so many paths that their feet are sore, and their hearts are broken, and they sometimes stumble their way into our hallways and aisles.

Company's coming. Are we ready? Not just the one, the savior, the king. But the world that one came to save and to transform and to love. So Isaiah asks us if we are ready to host, to teach about the ways of the Lord, to guide the world into paths of right living. Are we ready to welcome the world into the presence of the Lord of life, the Prince of Peace? Are we ready to love the world as he loves the world, to embrace the whole world, to connect and to claim them as brothers and sisters? This hosting thing isn't easy. There are days when we want to be left alone; when we want everyone to find their own way and follow their own paths. Yet, holding on to hope means that we have signed up for this duty, for this joy. Joy? Well, of course. Throwing parties is all about joy, about making others feel welcome and wanted. It is about setting aside our own comforts for the joy of another. The joy of including. The joy of growing the family with the one we've been waiting for, without even knowing who it was coming up the path to our door.

So, how do we do that? How do we sweep the paths and light the lights so that those who wander near might know that they will find a welcome here? Isaiah seems to think it is simple. He switches from the passive to the active at the end of the passage. He switches from God's task to our task in one verse.

“Come,” he says, “O house of Jacob, come you who inhabit the family of God, you who serve as hosts on the highest mountain, you who let the teaching flow out and the welcome be all inclusive, come. Let us walk in the light of the Lord!” In other words, we live our welcome. We must be the light that we set in the window so that the path to the door can be found!

When Wesley declared “the world is my parish,” he was not claiming authority as much as accepting responsibility. Disciple-making must always be an inward and an outward-directed activity. This gift we have, this Christ we claim, is not a treasure to be hoarded, as it is a blessing to be shared. We are truly blessed to be a blessing to the whole world.