

Because God

Or

God's How is Our Why

Ordinary Time

August 2-30, 2020

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – You Give Them Something

August 2, 2020

[Romans 9:1-5](#), [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – The Word is Near You

August 9, 2020

[Romans 10:5-15](#), [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – To the Lost Sheep

August 16, 2020

[Romans 11:1-2a & 29-32](#), [Matthew 15: 21-28](#)

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Who Do You Say?

August 23, 2020

[Romans 12: 1-8](#), [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Holding Fast

August 30, 2020

[Romans 12: 9-21](#), [Matthew 16:21-28](#)

In this Ordinary Time worship series, we engage in a Gospel/Epistle tango as we move between some of the more startling stories of Jesus and his earthly ministry and Paul's attempt to put a frame of possibility and understanding around the story of Jesus. Sometimes guided by Matthew's storytelling, other times led by

the beautifully weighty prose of the Epistle to the Romans, we dig down into core of our lived-out faith. How do we live into these miraculous moments in Jesus' life in our world today? Are we called to be miracle workers too? Or is there something else going on here? What if we're asking the wrong question about the statements and actions of Jesus? What if it isn't supposed to be a "how," but a "why?" What if it's not a behavior to emulate, but a motivation to live as followers of Jesus? That is why the longer title for our series is "God's How Is Our Why." But perhaps you can grab hold of a simpler one: "Because God!"

Week 1: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – You Give Them Something
August 2, 2020 – [Romans 9:1-5](#), [Matthew 14:13-21](#)

INTRODUCTION

Our focus is Jesus. Always, yes of course, but particularly in this series we are looking at Jesus and then looking at us. Not so much so we can emulate Jesus, but so that we can find motivation for what it is that we do. God's *how* is our *why*, remember?

In our Gospel text for this week, Jesus feeds the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. Never mind the *how*, let's talk about the *why*. (Check the preaching notes for more details on the shift from *how* to *why*.) The motivation for this miracle is compassion. Matthew identifies that in the second verse of the passage. Despite Jesus wanting to spend some time alone, he recognizes the needs of those around him and wants to meet those needs.

So, this series begins with an opportunity to celebrate the serving ministries of the church. How are you seeing all the people in your community? How are you meeting needs of folks within and outside of the church? Remember it isn't about amounts, though we do like to keep track of what we give and the number of hours we serve. But God can take a little and make a huge difference in the lives of those around us.

This is also an opportunity to celebrate the abundance of God's grace. How has a little word, a small gesture, a seemingly insignificant moment made a great

impact on us? What testimony can we give about the abundance of God's grace in our own lives, or in the lives of those with whom we care? Now is the time to hear the stories of transformed lives because hungers were met and brokenness healed.

Some of those who engage in serving ministries of the church may be reluctant to speak; that isn't their gift, they might say. But someone should tell their stories and relate the impact they are making. Find seven people, five loaves and two fish, whose stories can inspire the rest of the congregation to give thanks for the abundance of God's grace in the midst of the congregation.

Fill the space with images of being fed, of caring, preferably by people in your congregation. Who reached out during the quarantine and made sure that hungry bellies were filled? Who had compassion on their neighbors and gave them something? And who is still doing it? Remember, the church never closed; it was deployed! In that sense, we can celebrate those who continued to be the church, even while not meeting face to face. Even if we are still apart, we are still the church.

Let there be images of abundance, a reminder that there should be enough for everyone to have what they need. Here in the summer heat, we rejoice in the produce of the farmers and gardeners of the church. Give thanks for growing things, for farm workers, for truckers and shippers, for grocers and roadside stands. Give thanks for the food that is available, even as we search for ways to resolve our distributions problems. Let's admit that there are food deserts and hungry people, even in this great nation of abundance. Let us resolve to be a part of the change in our community and our world. Let us be those who see the hungry in our midst and seek to give them something.

Our color is still the green of growing things, supplemented with all the wonder and beauty of creation in this summer of discontent. But let our discontent be about inequality and lack for those who are hungry. Our songs are songs of praise to the Creator of all good things, the Provider of all we need. Let us also sing of the rallying call to mission and service, to right the wrongs of injustice and inequality. The offering could include canned goods, or produce from gardens that would then be taken, with proper precautions, to food banks or feeding

stations. Let God's *how* become our *why* as we recall that Jesus said, "You give them something."

PREACHING NOTES

Miracle stories can easily suck all the air out of the room, or out of the sermon. That's part of why we offer an interplay between Paul's Letter to the Romans and these wonderful stories from Matthew's Gospel. It is not, however, our intention to diminish the miracle in any way. We're not trying to "explain away" what Jesus did. Nor do we suggest that it was some kind of sleight of hand or appeal to the better nature of those in the crowd. It is a curious tendency of preachers and interpreters to try and explain the miracles. Either we're trying to convince everyone it was indeed a genuine miracle (as if Jesus needed our affirmation), or we're trying to make things fit into a scientific mindset that says everything has a natural explanation. Wherever you might fall on that spectrum, our contention for this series at least is that the *how* question is the wrong question to ask.

Let's ask a different question, then: "Was Jesus being serious when he said to the disciples who told him to send the people home because they were getting hungry, 'you give them something to eat'? Was Jesus trying to stump the disciples, or was he really attempting to get them to solve the problem?"

Think about it. Maybe he was just messing with them, hoping that they would realize how much they needed him. We need that from time to time; we think we are all capable, and we forget that we need a savior; we need someone who can pull us out of the mess we've gotten ourselves into. Maybe he was drawing a line in the sand, so that they would know their limits, their weaknesses.

On the other hand, maybe Jesus was trying to get them to see that their resources - allied with the power of God - were more than they thought, more than enough. Maybe Jesus was trying to change the attitude that says, "We have nothing but five loaves and two fish." We tend to look at what we don't have rather than at what we do. We tend to feel overwhelmed by the problems we face rather than being willing to start with what might seem like inadequate resources and see what God can do with what we bring. "Send the crowds away" so that they can solve their own problems is a common response to the needs

around us. Can we hear Jesus saying to us, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat”?

Then we have Paul chiming in from Romans, chapter 9, with a recitation of resources. Yes, he sounds like he’s trying to wash his hands of them, the people with the resources, that is. And he is, to an extent. Not of the resources, however, not of the glory and covenants and the giving of the law, not of the worship and the promises. No, he will cling to these. They are the resources needed to do anything in the name of the Lord. They are the gifts that have been given by God that equip the people of God to accomplish anything necessary—not the least of which is to recognize the one who comes in the name of the Lord. That’s the source of Paul’s frustration here.

We must tread carefully over these verses, however. We don’t, for example, need to read this as a rejection of the Jews, which could be a source of anti-Semitism. Instead, it is possible to see in these verses a respect for the forbearers of the faith and perhaps a wistful longing that his family might see what he sees in Jesus the Christ, the fulfillment of all they had worked and longed for throughout their long journey of wrestling with God. “Israel” means the one who wrestles with God. For Paul, the result of all that faithful wrestling is the person of Jesus. And he longs for his people to see that and to claim that.

It’s obvious to him. At least he learned to see after he was struck blind and guided by one of the faithful ones back into the light. Now, he hopes to lead all those who are almost there into the deepest relationship. Is that too much to read in these verses? Perhaps, but maybe if we could peel back the layers of Christian anti-Semitism, we might find a simpler message, a more profound hope.

We can’t pass over the feeding story in Matthew without making note of the count. “Those who ate were five thousand men, not counting women and children.” One of our tasks in biblical interpretation is figuring out who has slipped to the margins, who has been ignored or diminished—not to put ourselves in a place of superiority to the Bible, but to be aware that in our application, we don’t perpetuate the diminishment, especially when we want to focus on the statement that we are to give them something to eat. The hungry that are around us, the tired and worn out, the despairing and depressed are, indeed, our responsibility. You give them something.

Week 2: Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – The Word is Near You

August 9, 2020 – [Romans 10:5-15](#), [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

INTRODUCTION

The Word is near you? How do we celebrate that this week? How do we claim the gift we've already been given? Perhaps that's the key—what we've already been given. This is a time for celebrating who we are as the people of God. Instead of prayers asking for what we don't have, maybe we can claim with joy what we already have. What is working in your community of faith? Where is growth happening? Where are lives being challenged and changed? Where are connections being made and hope restored? Today could be a celebration of ministry and a telling of stories of how the Word is near.

Our songs are full of thanksgiving and joy for what God has done and is doing in our midst. Sing "I Sing the Almighty Power of God" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 152), for example, or "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 712) as a way of giving thanks for the people around us and among us.

There could be images of the church at work, or even of the community that surrounds the church. The other part of the theme for this week is witnessing, telling the story of Jesus to ears that are longing to hear, whether they know it or not. Did you do a vacation Bible school this summer? Online perhaps? What can you share about that experience? Who was included? Where is the word that is near to you being shared with those around you? Tell the story of the church.

The green of growing and living things can be supplemented with the colors that represent your community—perhaps the local school's colors, or a mixture of colors if you have more than one school system near you. This is the mission field, where there are ears wanting to hear. You can also celebrate the "missionaries" from your local church who attend those schools, another way of drawing attention to the students of your church who bring the word with them as they live and work in those environments.

A key to grasping the theme of this service will be providing people opportunities to speak of faith. Here again, we turn to the discipline of witness. Perhaps during the service there could be space for some to speak of their own faith. We practice our witness in the gathering of the community of faith, so that when we are at large in the world around us we more easily find the words we need to speak at an opportune moment. Or maybe there could be an outline of a faith witness in front of the worshipers, asking them to fill in the blanks or to flesh out the message with their own stories. If we are not putting anything in people's hands because of virus prevention, then offer to text the outline to their phones or to email it. Put the outline or sample witness front and center on the church web page or Facebook page so that it is easily accessible.

Let our intercessory prayers today be for those who haven't heard the Word that dwells within us and for the courage to speak of faith even when it is difficult. As we celebrate what we have and what we are doing, let us encourage one another to tell our story in as many places as we can.

PREACHING NOTES

Are you a boat person? Are you the kind of person who has a boat and enjoys boating activities such as skiing, tubing, and skimming across the water? Or maybe there have even been times when you got to enjoy someone else's boat or you have even tried skiing a couple of times.

Maybe your dad had a little fishing boat and put a small outboard motor on it and you would zip across the lake looking for fishing spots. Do you remember wanting to ski behind it, or at least tube, but it would strain the engine, so you never got to ski? But maybe not. Maybe you're just a dry ground kind of person. Perhaps it is your overactive imagination that keeps you from getting a boat. It is easy to think of everything that could go wrong when you are out on the water. Just ask Peter.

OK, you've read this one before. You might even have your own sermons already worked out for this passage. I don't blame you. But before you go off on your own direction, consider these questions: First, did Jesus want Peter to get out of the

boat? And was the reprimand about Peter's lack of faith really because he couldn't walk on water?

Most of the time you hear sermons - and you may have even preached sermons - on this text with the tagline to keep your eyes upon Jesus. This is a familiar theme in the New Testament. Paul tells us to keep our eyes on the prize that is the upward call of Christ Jesus our Lord. The writer to Hebrews tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Keeping your eyes on Jesus is a smart thing to do.

In our story for today, it is when Peter looks at the wind and the waves that he begins to sink. It is when he takes hold of Jesus' hand that he rises above his struggles and finds his way back to safety. It doesn't take a lot of study to come to the conclusion that keeping focused on Jesus is a better way to walk—whether on dry land or on water. Certainly, we should keep our eyes upon Jesus.

Now, maybe I am trying to justify my own cowardice, but I wonder if Jesus is really asking us to walk on water. We are told in many places that we can do mighty works in Jesus' name, it's true. I know too that we shouldn't shy away from difficult tasks because we are given the power of the Spirit. I know that there are labors that the Lord needs to be done, and his plan is that we are the doers. I know that there are many unexplainable things that I have encountered and that others have encountered for which the only proper response is to give praise to God.

Jesus sends them away. In the story, he is trying to have some time alone to pray and rest in the presence of the Father. He got interrupted by the crowd earlier and ended up having to cater a meal no one was planning for (except maybe him). So, now he sends them off so that he can stay back for a little while. Of course, there was nothing said about how he was going to catch up to them later. The trains didn't run that late and the airport was closed due to fog. Actually, it could be argued that Galilee was a pretty busy lake, and he had already commandeered one boat. Who's to say he couldn't do it again?

But there is a layer beyond the immediate story. This is the tale of the church that has been sent on ahead without the physical presence of Christ. This was the environment in which Matthew was writing the Gospel—a church adrift on the sea of persecution with storms rising (if not persecution, then perhaps confusion,

or apathy, antagonism). But here we are drifting, wondering if we can make it to the other side on our own.

Then we see a ghost or something. That's all we get, isn't it? A ghost. A vision. A hope and dream that we dare not place too much trust in. We are, after all, left to our own devices. Aren't we? We've got to make this thing work on our own. We've got to solve all the problems ourselves. Don't we? We've got to conquer the enemy all by ourselves now. Don't we?

Of course not. In the story beyond the story, Matthew's readers knew that the sea represented all that opposed God. In the ancient world, the sea was the source of death and pain. When sailors set out for deep sea work, their families would perform rituals that were essentially funerals, because they didn't expect them to come back. And if and when they did return, the reception was as though they had returned from the dead. The sea was the absence of God—at least in popular belief. The biblical witness is that God is the God of sea and dry land both.

Jesus reaffirms that he is lord of all; he is the one who can calm the storm; he is the one who is present even when it feels like he is absent. When the disciples see him from their beleaguered boat, they can't really believe it is Jesus. It is a ghost, they cry in fear. It is something else to trouble us. It is no real help to us in this desperate situation. But Jesus says, "No, it is really me." Actually, he says, "I Am" —just as the voice from the burning bush did; just like the force that freed a nation from despair. "I Am," he says. "Trust me," he says. "I am with you even when you don't think so."

Peter isn't sure. He needs proof. He needs to step on the waves, to conquer his fears on his own. He needs to see that which oppresses him beneath his feet. So, with a sigh, Jesus says, "All right. Come on." And Peter does it, for a moment. Then he fails and asks for help. "You of little faith, why did you doubt," Jesus says to him. But did Peter fail because he couldn't walk on water or because he got out of the boat?

I believe that the great work of faith that Jesus asks of all of us is to trust in his presence, even when, or perhaps especially when, we can't feel it. When there is no external reason to believe that Christ is with us, that's when we need all the faith within us to get in the boat and sail. Certainly, I'd like to walk on water

sometimes. But in the end, I'd rather get in the boat with Jesus and ride out the storm all the way to other side.

Then Paul comes alongside and says, "The word is near you" (Romans 10:8). It sounds as if he is asking us to stay in the boat too, to claim what is already ours. You don't need to climb up to heaven (to walk on water?), because Christ has already come down to you. You don't need to dive down into the depths to raise Christ from the dead, because Christ has already been raised. We don't need to do miraculous things for God; we just need to do faithful things. That's what Paul wants us to hear; that's what living by the law means now— not slavish obedience to the written law, but day-by-day application of the law of love. You know that law, don't you? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will live." You've heard that before. You know that. That word is in you.

So then Paul gives us a way to live that out. Oh, certainly not the only way to live that out. There are all kinds of ways to live love for God and neighbor in our context. But one way is to speak that word aloud. Yes, Jesus is in our hearts, but if Jesus is never on our lips, if we never speak about Jesus, then what is going on in our hearts?

Paul takes it even further. He says that proclaiming, speaking about Jesus in public, is necessary for our salvation. Believe in your hearts, yes, then you are justified. But confessing, speaking, telling about Jesus, and you are saved. Is there a distinction between justified and saved? In this passage, Paul says yes. Justified, being made right with God, is a personal thing, a reorientation of one's life, becoming a new person. "Believing" is never just intellectual assent; it is a reordering of one's priorities, a realignment of one's behaviors; it is a shift in one's values and actions and convictions. To believe in Jesus is to stake one's life on him, which is much more than just thinking that faith in Jesus is a good idea.

Salvation then flows from that reorientation. Now you live it outwardly. Now you tell others. Now you proclaim who and what and why you are the new person that you are. You do this not to brag or draw attention to yourself, but to lift up the one who caused you to redo everything about your life. You do this to bring glory to the name of Jesus.

And before you think that “confess with your lips” means answering some questions in the safety of the community of faith, keep reading. Paul goes on to say that this confession is a part of the process of bringing others to the faith. It is telling others about what you know. Confessing with your lips is understanding that you have been sent. This gift of salvation is not something to keep to yourself. It is not a secret that you hold in the hidden places in your own heart. No, it is meant to be lived out loud.

Ultimately, our salvation is wrapped up in everyone else’s salvation. Our task is not complete, our salvation is not complete, until everyone else has heard and responded to the word that is near you.

Week 3: Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – To the Lost Sheep
August 16, 2020 – [Romans 11:1-2a & 29-32](#), [Matthew 15: 21-28](#)

INTRODUCTION

This week’s topic is difficult. It is so difficult the worship team might be inclined to choose a different text. Both Paul’s letter to the Romans and Matthew’s Gospel present to us complicated texts that will be hard to wrestle into an easily digestible form for a comfortable Sunday morning. Yet, this is precisely why it is worth the struggle. Our message today is twofold: First, we are wrestling with the wideness of God’s mercy and attempting to answer the question, “Who is included in God’s saving grace?” On the other hand, we are faced with the realization that Jesus doesn’t always behave the way we think he should. We’ll deal with both issues more fully in the Preaching Notes. But we begin with thoughts about how we will worship together this day.

The liturgy should include the Psalm assigned for this day, Psalm 133 (*United Methodist Hymnal*, page 850). Let there be a declaration of unity among the kindred of God, even while we wrestle with who exactly are kindred and who are not. That’s the issue before us: inclusion. In Romans, Paul wrestles with the issue of the Jews who have not accepted Christ. In Matthew, the church wrestles with the idea of a boundaryless grace that meets anyone and everyone in need.

Maybe there is space during this service for reflecting on the diversity of the congregation. Begin with the positive. Is diversity in age? In economic class? Is there diversity in the families of origin, long-term residents of the area and recent transplants? Is there ethnic or racial diversity? Are there other language groups within the body of the church? Whatever diversity there is can be celebrated. But where there is a lack, perhaps confession is in order. Does the church reflect the diversity of the neighborhood? If not, some reflection on why not might be in order. How might the congregation be more inclusive? How might individuals and groups from the church reach out across the lines that society has drawn to establish a welcoming atmosphere?

“Draw the Circle Wide” (*Worship & Song*, 3154) is a hymn that embraces the inclusiveness of God’s grace. Our songs should speak of the world we seek to invite, a story to tell to the nations, which is everyone. It should be a part of our thinking that we don’t just seek the ones who look like us. We should try to reach the fullness of God’s creation, the many-hued complexions that surround us. But we don’t have to look far. Unless your community is very unusual, there is diversity right outside your door.

Perhaps in preparation for worship this week, you could research the makeup of the surrounding community. Some research might remind the worshipping congregation that the world is truly getting smaller. Perhaps a slide of the local demographics would be eye-opening for some. This isn’t necessarily a call to a specific mission or evangelistic event, but about awareness. It is to help ensure that people are aware of who is around them and how they might be included in the “y’all come” invitation.

PREACHING NOTES

Is anyone considering checking out the Psalm for this week? “How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity” (See Introduction). That would make for a much friendlier sermon today, wouldn’t you agree? Instead, we have Paul talking about the place of the Jews (yes, even those who haven’t accepted Christ as Messiah) in God’s salvation work. And we have Jesus on what seemed to be an off day in Tyre and Sidon.

First of all, it is not your responsibility to defend our Savior from the story that Matthew tells. It is a natural impulse of many a preacher to put in some explanatory words to help soften the harshness of this moment. You can even find it in some commentaries. Some will write that Jesus was just testing everyone, the disciples and the woman herself. Others will write that he was tired from a long day of teaching and healing and was just looking for some time off. Still others make a big deal out of the fact that the word Matthew puts in Jesus' mouth isn't really dog; it's more like puppy. We don't want to give the food of the faith to little dogs. That doesn't sound so bad. Right?

On the other hand, letting the whole incident pass without comment runs the risk of allowing racial slurs to be permitted; after all, Jesus did it. Maybe we don't have to excuse; and maybe we can't really explain; but something significant is going on here. Some have argued that Jesus' whole view of his mission and ministry changed that day, or that this was the pivot that turned a Jewish prophet concerned with his own people into the Savior of the whole world.

In Matthew's Gospel, the first time Jesus sends the disciples out he tells them to go nowhere among the Gentiles (10:5); but by the end of the Gospel, Jesus sent them to make disciples of all nations (28:19). Could it be that he remembered the lesson learned in the district of Tyre and Sidon? Was it truly the woman's persistence that caused Jesus to rethink how the crumbs would fall from the table of grace?

Paul speaks of grace, too— the grace of God's gifting. Throughout the book of Romans, he has been speaking to both Jewish and Gentile Christians. But here, he speaks most specifically to the Gentile followers. Some believe this is so because he has heard of a sense of superiority creeping in to some of the Gentile disciples. In the verses the lectionary skips over (and as an aside, it is always a good idea to read through the skipped verses to understand the flow of the argument. Though in this case, you'd have to read from Chapter 8 to really get the flow!), Paul talks about boasting as if it might be happening. As usual, he tries to put the boasters in their place by reminding them that it is not by their own merits that they have attained their place in the tree of life; therefore, it would behoove them to be a bit humbler.

The thrust of his argument, however, comes in the assigned verses. “For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable”(11:29). While there might be some debate as to precisely what Paul was going for here, it does seem clear that he doesn’t want to write off the Jews who have not claimed Christ. They are still the chosen of God; God does not renege on the covenant, no matter what. His hope, it also seems clear, is that through patience and perseverance, those who follow Christ can live in such a way as to show that this is indeed the way to life. That was his hope for his own life and example, and it would be the same for us. We are called to live in hope with open doors, open minds, and open hearts.

If you add one more verse past the reading for this week, you end with this: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are [God’s] judgments and how inscrutable [God’s] ways!” (Rom. 11:33) This is what we mean by God’s *how* is our **why**. We can’t always figure out what God is doing; we can’t always explain everything that Jesus said and did. But we don’t have to. We just need to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and love our neighbor, all our neighbors, any neighbors, like ourselves. And when they ask why, we say “because God!”

Week 4: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Who Do You Say?

August 23, 2020 – [Romans 12: 1-8](#), [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

INTRODUCTION

Last week may have been a struggle, text-wise anyway. But this week, ideas just fly off the page. We have two texts that leap into our heads and hearts from which we can bring the community of faith to a resounding shout of joy. First, there is the encounter along the way between Jesus and the disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” Confession time! Statement of faith time! Any new members to celebrate? Any baptisms to perform? This is a perfect day for such “claiming the name” rituals in the life of the church. Did you delay confirmation until some later date? Today would be a great day for that.

True, it is summer and whether we are face to face as yet, or still streaming our services, or both, it might be hard to gather the enthusiasm for new member classes. If that's the case, then celebrate membership, celebrate those who have made that commitment, who have claimed the name of Jesus. We all have been asked and have answered at various times in our lives, "Who do you say that Jesus is?" Let's make that claim again.

Our second text is also a favorite of many, Romans 12, which begins like this: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Another statement of being all-in in our faith, present your bodies (see Preaching Notes)

Our songs should be lifting up the name of Jesus. Our prayers and litanies should be about our faith in that name. We should recite ancient or modern creeds of the faith. Did your confirmation class write a creed this year or in a previous year? Dig it out and use it again. This is our opportunity to reclaim our faith as a vital and vibrant part of our lives.

It might be an interesting exercise to seek out an array of pictures of Jesus from a variety of cultures to have more images than we are used to seeing. It is revealing to see how Jesus has been depicted among different people groups. A slideshow with a familiar Jesus hymn or song playing underneath, and the words "Who do you say that I am?" interspersed with the images would be an effective way to challenge our presuppositions and prejudices.

End with an altar call. Maybe it isn't something you are used to doing. But it is a part of the standard Sunday service in the front of *The United Methodist Hymnal*. "Invitation to Christian Discipleship" is how it is named there. But it is an altar call. Maybe you move forward, or maybe you stay in place. Issue the invitation to respond to Jesus' question again. Provide space for the congregation to present their bodies as living sacrifices. Sometimes it is the act of moving that gets our brains and our hearts engaged. Sometimes it is the invitation to do something we thought we did a long time ago that renews our faith and brings us into a living

relationship with the one who still calls us to follow. This is who we are; this is what we do Because God.

PREACHING NOTES

Let's start with Paul. Now, there are many who would stop reading at that point. They are convinced that most of what is wrong with the church, and really wrong - not just the goofy stuff - can be laid at the feet of Paul. It is his treatment of women, for example, that set a pattern for church-sponsored sexism for centuries. It is his soft approach to slavery that led to unimaginable suffering that still hasn't come to an end.

It is easy to be sympathetic to their concerns, and certainly some of what Paul wrote (or what was written in his name) has been used to damage the cause of Christ historically. But a proper reading of the context and some historical reflection can reinterpret much of what has been misused. Perhaps in the Kingdom, Paul frequently shakes his head at the church and says something along the line of "That's not what I meant!"

The passage we examine this week isn't at all controversial. It contains, in fact, two of many people's favorite verses in the whole Bible. It makes sense that the passage would continue on after the first two verses. But those first two verses can't really stand on their own. If you snip off verses 3 through 8 (not to mention most of what follows in the Epistle to the Romans), you'll hear a very individualistic message (which we need to hear from time to time, and I'll get to that). But I want to work backward for a moment. Look at where the passage ends. It ends in community.

Verse three introduces humility. "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought." That is a very countercultural message these days. We are all about self-esteem, about building up. "I'm worth it," purrs the woman touting the expensive hair care products. And why not? We are worth it. We are of immeasurable value. Esteem is a biblical concept, to be sure. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them (Psalm 8:4)," says the psalmist. "Yet you made them a little lower than God, crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:5). You can't get more esteemed than that, can you? "Even the hairs on your head are numbered"

(insert relative numbers joke here), “you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12-7). All right, not the same punch as glory and honor, but you get the point. We are valued, we are worth it.

But Paul seems to deny it—a least at first. We don’t like being put in our place (“more highly than you *ought*”). We like to think we are high, and no one is higher. Paul isn’t really denying what the psalmist and Jesus said. He’s just saying that we ought to remember that those things weren’t said to us individually, but to us collectively.

The problem we have with the self-esteem emphasis is that we usually turn it into *who are we better than* rather than simply *we are good*. It is not a competition, says Paul, it is a state of being. All are good in God’s eyes, and all have a role to play in the kingdom, or in that image of the kingdom called the church. So, step up and join the party. Step up and take an oar. Step up and bring the piece you’ve been perfecting. However you want to envision the invitation, it is to be a working, rejoicing part of the community.

The first two verses prepare us for taking our part in the party we call the kingdom. We need to be prepared to serve. This is where Chapter 12 begins, with this call for commitment to the whole. And all it takes is everything - body and soul. Re-read those first two verses - *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* ² *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect*

Note a couple of important things, please: First your body is needed. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Jesus wants your body. OK, not as good as a T-shirt slogan since it is subject to misinterpretation. But it is true. Jesus needs us to do our faith, not just think about it. Our commitment to Christ comes out in our hands and our feet, as well as in our thoughts and our words. It how we live each and every day. And it is a sacrifice, a gift given away; it isn’t about what we get out of it; it isn’t to make us feel good. That it does, in fact, make us feel good is just a bonus. But if the feeling good part becomes the end, we are liable to not work when we don’t feel like it. That is where we lose the sacrifice part. *Present your bodies.*

But Paul says Jesus doesn't want unthinking drones doing manual labor. Instead, he wants to work transformation within us through our minds. "Be transformed by the renewing of our minds." *Minds* means brains, in part. But Paul is talking about more than just our intellectual capacity. Paul means all that makes us the unique creatures that we are. It is our essence, our being, the real inner us. That is what Jesus wants us to offer and through which he wants to work. We might understand it to be *soul*. Jesus wants us, body and soul.

There is another reality check in those first two verses. Paul reminds us that change is inevitable. We might as well get used to it. Better than that, we might as well direct it, or choose the kind of change we prefer. Something is going to change us - either the world or Christ. Why not choose? Do not be conformed to this world - do not be changed by this world - but be transformed by the search for the will of God at work in you. Stay alert, Paul warns, stay tuned to what God wants to do in and through you, or you will drift into patterns of thinking and behavior that fit into the world in which we live. You will discover yourself thinking thoughts and engaging in behaviors that are far from the person you want to be or that God created you to be. Pay attention, says Paul.

You are defined only in relation to the one we follow. That's where Matthew's Gospel text comes in —with Jesus' insistent and important question. It is important because all four gospels include this question. You know how rare that is. The question is insistent because it demands an answer.

This seems to be an important moment in the teaching ministry of Jesus. The importance is attested by the repetition of this event in three of the four gospels. Something significant is going on here, but what is it exactly?

Our first question must be who is this about? Is it about Jesus, or is it about the disciples? Matthew seems to come down on the side of the latter. His expansion of the conversation between Jesus and Peter indicates that for Matthew at least this was a teaching moment for the disciples and for us. It was not the moment for declaring to the world who Jesus really is; it was an insider moment, a called out community moment.

What is significant about this passage (or one significant thing anyway) is that this is one of only two uses of the word *church* in the gospels. And the other use of the word is two chapters later in Matthew, when Jesus is telling us of the

reconciliation purpose of the church. So, we need to listen closely to hear what is being said.

This is a passage about identity. It is first about the identity of Jesus. Who was he? Who is he? Peter got it right. Jesus says so. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Theologically, he is declaring that Jesus is the one we have been looking for, the one we need, whether we are aware of that need or not. "You are the Messiah." And that this Messiah, the one we need, is the one who comes from God - is of one essence with God - the Son of the living God. Peter declares, whether he realizes it or not, that Jesus is the one who connects, who brings together human need and divine presence. Jesus is the one who reconciles, who puts us in our brokenness back in touch with God's wholeness.

But it can't be just about the identity of Jesus. Because of the identity of Jesus, *our* identity is transformed. We are now not just individual followers, but we have been called into a new community of faith under the lordship of Christ. We are different because of the claim that Christ is Lord. Our identity is wrapped up in the person of Christ.

And what have we become? What is the nature of the church that Jesus identifies? He gives us hints in his conversation with Peter that afternoon near Caesarea Philippi. First, acceptance of Christ is transformative. You are Peter, says Jesus; you are new, are different, have a purpose in the community of faith.

As an aside, some scholars wonder whether this is the place where Simon came to be called Peter. There is no evidence that the word "*petros*" was used as a name before this historical figure. But then, within the passage itself, Simon is identified as Simon Peter, even before Jesus declares him so. This might be a case of using the name he was best known by, even though not historically accurate. Or it might be that it was a nickname, or even a name of derision - Simon the blockhead, dumb as a box of rocks, or something like that. Then Jesus takes what was once a title of derision and turns it into a name of honor. You are Peter, the rock upon which I will build my church.

The identifier of those who belong to Christ is that they are willing to be foundational; they are willing to be built upon. Paul talks of Christ the cornerstone, but Matthew says Peter - and I believe by extension all of us - is the foundation. Christ is the builder; we are the materials; we are the ones who give

shape - like the foundation gives shape - to the building that is the church. But it all rests upon us.

Next is the promise: “The gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). It being the church; it being the community of which we are foundational. It being all we are called to be and all we long to be. It being the body. Hades was seen in the first place as the realm of the dead, which means that it will not end. All things have a lifespan; we have come to believe. Things, institutions, lifestyles, civilizations rise and fall. But the church - not necessarily any denomination or human manifestation - will survive into eternity—that is the promise. That means we can be bold, as we seek to give shape to the church, to be foundational. We can take risks, because we can’t kill it! That is pretty amazing, when you think of it. Why should we fear failure when Christ tells us that the church will endure?

It also means that the attack from the forces of darkness - the gates of Hades being the conduit from that world to this - will not succeed either. We need not live in fear of any attack, demonic or human. We are stronger than we realize.

Finally, we have the keys and the binding and loosing (verse 19). What is that all about? Is Jesus establishing the hierarchical system that became the Roman Catholic Church? Does he offer to Peter the ability to determine who is in and who is out? Is it now the church’s job to determine worthiness for eternity and entry into heaven? Do we indeed hold the keys to entrance into the kingdom of God?

Some have argued so. The church has taken on the task of being the arbiter of salvation and has been all too willing to withhold entry into the community to any who don’t measure up to an uncomfortable ideal that we are ready to declare. Surely, it is the responsibility of the church to make this determination. Or is it?

What are the keys that Jesus hands over to Peter? What is the power that now resides in our hands? What was it that gave Peter the recognition from Jesus in this passage? Knowledge. And not just any knowledge, but the knowledge of the identity of the Christ. The key to the kingdom that was handed to Peter and that is now ours is the knowledge of who Jesus is. We are called to teach and to interpret. Binding and loosing is a descriptive way of talking about Bible study. We are to interpret the scriptures in such a way that they become intelligible to a new

world. We are to inform, to share, to teach about who is the answer to our prayers, the desire of all our hearts, and the fulfillment of our needs.

We are called to share the identity of Christ with the world, so that they too can become a part of the called-out community called the church. We welcome; we invite; we encourage; we instruct. And verse 20 is, I think, an action plan.

“Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” There are all sorts of biblical and theological interpretations of this verse, many of which are compelling arguments for the drama of the Christ event. But for our purposes, there is only one that makes sense to me. Either we say that this was a timed command that is no longer in force; it was for the first hearers for specific reasons that no longer apply. Or it is reminding us how to evangelize.

Evangelism begins with conversation. It begins, many argue, with listening. We can no longer, if we ever could, argue folks into belief in or acceptance of Christ by relying on the authority of scriptures or doctrinal statements. “The Bible says” does not carry any weight in our world. Beginning with “Jesus Christ is Lord; the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it” sounds to most folks like nonsense, like bumper-sticker rhetoric. It isn’t convincing.

So, what is convincing? Jesus says don’t tell anyone I am the Messiah, but perhaps he meant we are to show them that he is the Messiah. Folks no longer want to know what we believe; they want to know how we live. Does our belief in Jesus make any difference to us, besides how we spend some time on Sunday mornings?

In other words, Jesus wants us to show and then tell—to be the community at work in the world and then respond to the inevitable questions with the gospel of Jesus Christ: “Why are you doing what you do? Why do you care about me so much? How can you be so loving?” We don’t lead with doctrine; we end up with it. We do what we do *Because God*.

Week 5: Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Holding Fast

August 30, 2020 – [Romans 12: 9-21](#), [Matthew 16:21-28](#)

INTRODUCTION

We're working from a list this week: Paul's list from Romans 12. The question is, "How do you let a list order your worship this week?" Is it a checklist, a how-are-we-doing-with-this list of attributes? Well, not really. Yes, it would be good to find ways to depict the various statements that Paul outlines in our text for this week. But we don't want to send folks away from worship feeling as if they've been given an impossible task to do before next week. Talk about the burden of homework!

Instead, let us celebrate the working of love in the midst of the people of God. Find stories to tell, pictures that reveal, people who have experienced genuine love, who have never lagged in zeal, who have contributed to the needs of the saints. Find something in Paul's recitation that reflects your congregation, how you've interacted with one another and with the wider community. The way to encourage behaviors is to show that they are already happening.

Bring images into the worship space, real or virtual. Let these images be of the community of faith putting flesh on the idea of genuine love, of living in harmony, of serving the Lord. Consider having a drama team acting out the various images as they are being read during the reading of the Romans text. It is one thing to intellectualize these concepts; it is another to see them played out and made real.

Let the prayers be prayers of thanksgiving for the love shared within the community, for the lives affected by the mission and ministry of the church. But let there also be acknowledgement of the gaps, confession of those who have been neglected, and cultural attitudes unchallenged.

Hymns and songs can be calls to a higher way of living, a deeper love, Christ-like love that motivates us. Sing "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 384), for example. Or consider "Rule of Life" (*Worship & Song*, 3117), which is a musical approach to the Wesley quote: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." The hymn could serve as a benediction that restates Romans 12:9-21 in simpler terms.

PREACHING NOTES

Let's start with Paul's list. Paul loves lists; there are plenty of them in the letters, even those thought to be from other authors.

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. "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, hold fast to what is good" (12:9). He divides our responsibilities into inside and outside, and this is an inside kind of statement. One of the problems we have being Christian in the world today is a tendency to do inside work outside and to do outside work on the inside. Let me explain what I mean.

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 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 world 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: "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" (12:11).

(As an aside, that last phrase could be read another way. Translation from the original Greek is a difficult process, partly because writers 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, 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, but we use them with even more tenderness. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep . . . associate with the lowly . . ." (12:15-16), and then the whole vengeance being God's providence 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 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.

Finally, we come to the coals. We might wish 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!

Here we turn to Matthew. And the only thing we can say is that Jesus is living out Paul's entire list. And then he carefully invites us to do the same. What love could be more genuine than a love that surrenders all, a love that endures suffering for another? Jesus doesn't make a list because he is the list. And as such, he becomes our model and our hope. No, we can't sacrifice our lives on a cross for the salvation of the world. But we can live each day in humble surrender to the need of the other, seeking to bring justice to a world that is broken and peace to a world tearing itself apart with divisions and hatred that rise up all around us with frightening regularity.

Like Peter, however, we too often wish for an easier faith, a pain-free, risk-free discipleship. "God forbid it, Lord!" Jesus' response to this outburst reminds us that when we seek such a path, we are in opposition to the work of Jesus in the world. The "Satan" in Hebrew means adversary, opposition. Some have come to calling it prosecuting attorney, those who bring a different case to the court. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that those who preach an easy grace, or a comfortable faith, are taking the role of the Satan in diminishing the power of the supreme, genuine act of love that Jesus and, through him, all followers seek to live out? Get behind me, Satan. Get in my path, follow my steps, do as I do. Stop opposing and start following!

Do not lag in zeal, Paul writes. Hold on until the end. Jesus says, "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom" (16:28). Whoops, did Jesus get it wrong? Some have argued that this statement comes from Mark's Gospel, and there the statement is, "some will not die before they see the Kingdom." And that could be argued that seeing what Christ has done and is doing in the world is something more accessible and

therefore possible. But here the statement is clearly about the return of Christ. Was Jesus wrong? Was this a belief of the church at the time of Matthew's writing and was put in Jesus' mouth? Or is there some other way to interpret these words that we're missing? It's not clear how important such a statement is to our faith today. One way to hear these words is to embrace the promise that God is in control, and we need not worry, even though the opposite seems more likely to our eyes. This is affirmation of God's sovereignty, even though we don't grasp the depths of it. In this series, it seems this is another case where God's *how* is our *why*. We don't need to know the details, just to live with the truth and the promise. We just need to live *Because God*.