



WISCONSIN CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Look to Jesus

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Summer is over, and together we look toward the beginning of yet another program year at Immanuel UCC. It should be a time of excitement and hope, a time of energy, enthusiasm, and deep joy in all of the possibility that awaits. But, I must confess, it's difficult to feel enthusiastic and hopeful, it's hard to talk about God's love and the promise of new life, when across our nation of late the voices of destruction, hatred, fear, and death have sought to drown out God's love song of peace on earth and goodwill to all (Luke 2:14).



Discussions about an epidemic of gun violence in the wake of the tragic shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio, the rounding-up and detention of people at work, children separated from parents, references to immigrants and asylum-seekers as an invading infestation, and the rearing of white supremacy's ugly head in racist chants prompted by voices in the halls of power have dominated the headlines recently. It's hard not to be left reeling and feeling helpless and hopeless in the face of it all.

What is an appropriate Christian response to what is happening in our country and our communities? What does our faith have to say to people who have become desensitized by violence and destruction, who have been numbed by fear, and who've had their hearts hardened by hatred? How on earth are we to go about repairing the breach of the fault lines which have fractured our sense of community and cooperation?

As your pastor I find myself wishing I knew what to say that would make things better. I wish I could say something that would inspire change and help things make sense – something that would contain equal parts comfort and courage for you, my beloved congregation. I wish I knew the exact right thing that would be the healing balm needed to soothe the ache of people heartsick, people angry, people scared, people bewildered, people divided.

I do know that remaining silent or shying away from talking about what's going on in the world around us as if it's somehow irrelevant or too controversial for church is never

the answer. We've learned from history that silence signals complicity and amounts to a neglect of moral responsibility.

The best I know to do is to look to Jesus – to the values he articulated, the values that define what it means to be a Christian, values that, for we who call ourselves followers of Jesus, should influence our choices in both our public and private lives. Our call is to take seriously his teachings by understanding that he *actually* meant what he said. He *actually* meant for people of faith to live what he taught. Perhaps the best place to begin, then, is by reminding ourselves of what Christian values actually are by recalling what Jesus himself taught.

Greatness: We must remain ever mindful that, for we who call ourselves Christians, no conversation about greatness can ignore what Jesus taught on the subject. Greatness, Jesus taught repeatedly, is measured in terms of service - service rendered most especially to the lowly, the least, the little, and the last (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; Matthew 18:4). There are no two ways about it for Jesus; greatness requires putting others first. Enough said.

Welcome the stranger: This value is articulated, not just in the teachings of Jesus, but over and over again all throughout scripture. But for his part, Jesus knows well what it means to be a stranger turned away in a vulnerable and desperate moment. Just before his birth, his parents, who are far from home, are told there is no room for them and that they'd have to fend for themselves. Because his parents kept being turned away is why Jesus ends up being born in a barn (Luke 2:7). More than that, Jesus himself was a refugee who, as a child with his parents, had to run for his life in order to escape a massacre in his homeland perpetrated by a corrupt and ruthless king (Matthew 2:13-21). We don't know what kind of welcome Jesus and his family received in Egypt when they crossed the border in search of safety. But at the very least we know he was not indefinitely separated from his parents, nor was his family sent back to where they had come from because Egypt didn't want to have to deal with them. It was Jesus, the refugee and the one for whom there was no room, who grew to teach that when we welcome strangers, it is as if we are welcoming Jesus in the flesh (Matthew 25:35). And when we turn strangers away, denying them hospitality for whatever reason, we may as well be turning away Jesus himself (Matthew 25:43-45).

Confront the powerful with truth: Jesus challenged the powerful with truth when they neglected the needs of the vulnerable (Luke 4:16-21; Luke 6:24-26; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 14:1-24; Matthew 19:13-15, 21-24; Mark 12:38-40; John 2:13-16; John 9:1-41; and many more). At every turn, Jesus stuck up for the poor and powerless. He called out anyone who would get ahead by cheating the vulnerable or by any other dishonest means. Time and again he warned against abuse of power and reminded anyone who would listen of the truth of God's special care for the poor and oppressed. I think, then, that means that as his followers we are expected to use our voices to call the powerful to account when they fail to uphold their moral responsibility to lead with compassion

and truth-telling, and we are expected to never make excuses for people of power who use their position to breathe lies aimed at cheating, belittling, and blaming the poor and powerless.

Love one another (John 15:12), and love your neighbor (Mark 12:31): Love for others, according to Jesus, is absolutely paramount. Along with love for God, love for our neighbors is our highest calling. In the story of the good Samaritan, Jesus tells us what it looks like to be a loving neighbor – to give of ourselves and to go out of our way to see to it that those in need have those needs fulfilled. The Samaritan even goes so far as to pay for the injured man's healthcare without any expectation of repayment (Luke 10:35). More than that, by telling a story which depicts a Samaritan (one whom Jesus' original audience considered to be an ethnic and religious outsider and historic enemy) as the hero, Jesus is illustrating that there isn't anyone whom we shouldn't consider our neighbor – even the ones we've been told to suspect and to loathe and exclude because they're just too different. That means that treatment, or even talk, of anyone which serves to belittle, humiliate, or demonize another, no matter who they are, or for whatever reason, is utterly unacceptable. Period. There is simply no excuse for hating others. Christians are those who love their neighbors – all of them – and Christians are those who understand that to love another is to want that other to flourish and to be willing to give of oneself in order to make that happen.

Nonviolence: Jesus is no fan of weapon-wielding. Not only does he inspire would-be stone-throwers to put down their stones when they have them poised to throw at a woman who's been presumed guilty (John 8:1-11), but also when the disciples ask whether they should strike with the sword, and they go ahead and do it without waiting for an answer, Jesus scolds them, saying "no more of this," and he heals the man who has been hurt (Luke 22:49-51). In the gospel of John's telling, Jesus says "put your sword [or your assault weapon] back" (John 18:11). Further, Jesus points out the senselessness in resorting to "an eye for any eye," calling his followers to instead turn the other cheek and show love to enemies (Matthew 5:38-47). I don't think it's outside the realm of reason, then, to suggest that these teachings imply a call to do whatever we can to curtail senseless violence. According to Jesus, we are not to arm ourselves to the gills against our neighbors; we are to love them – even the ones we call enemy. Nowhere in Jesus' teachings is there any suggestion that there might be a good reason for an average person to be in possession of a devastating weapon of war. Instead, disciples are permitted nothing more than a simple staff for defending themselves (Mark 6:8) and are called to remember that it is the peacemakers who are blessed as children of God (Matthew 5:9).

Humility: Jesus has a lot to say on the subject of humility, but more than just talking about humility, he shows his followers what it looks like by washing his disciples' feet, serving them at the table, and bringing little children in from the margins to the center of community (John 13:4-17; Matthew 18:4; Luke 14:11). Humility involves a willingness to listen and learn, a willingness to put others first, and a willingness to take

the voices and ideas of others into consideration without concluding we already have all the answers and therefore have no need to pay attention. Humility also requires a willingness to examine ourselves – our actions, our language, our assumptions, and the ways we participate in a system in which some profit at the expense of others. To be humble is to possess the grace to change when confronted by our own wrong-headedness.

In a world where all too often self-interest, falsehood, and fear seek to claim our allegiance, the values taught by Jesus are the values we cannot betray, the values that make us who we are as Christians. I'll say it again, because I don't think we can be reminded enough: Jesus actually meant what he said. He actually meant for ordinary people like you and me to live according to his teachings. The ideas of greatness (as defined by Jesus), love of neighbor, welcome to the stranger, non-violence, truthful challenge to the powerful, and humility are not merely suggestions of things that would be nice to try in an ideal world if we weren't so busy or imperfect or ordinary. Jesus seems to believe that we are *actually capable* of such things, imperfect and ordinary as we may be. And because he seems to believe us capable, he lays out the living of these values as nothing less than *expectations*.

One of my heroes in the field of Christian ethics, Reinhold Niebuhr, who was very much a stalwart voice within our tradition of German Reformed theology, wrote about the moral courage Christians must summon in the effort to live by the values espoused by Jesus. "The hope of the perfect realization" of these values, Niebuhr wrote, should "generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power in high places."¹ May the hope of which Niebuhr speaks fill our hearts and our minds as we begin a new program year and as we continue to work together to serve the church of Jesus.

~Rev. Laura Yurs

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr in *Immoral Man & Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. 1932.