

SERMON NOTES 1-25-26 – Phylene Wiggins

Please be seated. Good morning, Trinity. This morning, I ask for your grace. I find myself incredibly disturbed and I haven't yet metabolized yesterday's killing in Minneapolis. I've been working on this morning's sermon for some time now as part of my training to become a deacon. I'm going to share what I've prepared, but before I do that, I'd like us to hold a space of silence for Alex Pretti and Renee Good, their family and friends, and the Minneapolis community. (WAIT 15 seconds)

Spirit, open our ears to hear your call to us today.

Some years ago, I received an invitation from an organization I didn't know to attend a reception in a prestigious club in downtown Los Angeles. I was interested in their work and mission and decided to attend. As I was waiting for the elevator on the appointed evening, the doors opened and well-known political figure stepped out. Gulp, I suddenly felt out of my element. Moments later, when I arrived at the reception, no one acknowledged me, except to hand me a name tag. Ugh, dread was now setting in. I wondered why I had ever said yes to this invitation. Suddenly, I heard my name called and recognized a familiar face--**Mary Ellen!** What a pleasant surprise! She greeted me warmly and started introducing me to the people in the room. The conversations began to flow. I was welcomed.

I suspect that most of us know this feeling—walking into a room and sensing, *I don't think I belong here*. It's uncomfortable and anxiety producing.

On the other hand, most of us also know what it feels like to walk into a place and someone smiles. Your name is remembered. Immediately you relax. There's a place for you.

God's dream of justice and hospitality is, at its heart, about that difference. It is about **who feels seen, who is welcomed, and who has room to breathe.**

Today's scriptures show us that **justice, unity, and hospitality are not side issues—they are signs that God's dream is taking root. God's dream of justice is not abstract. It happens in real places, among real people, through real practices.**

Today's Gospel from Matthew tells us that Jesus initiates his ministry and preaches his first sermon in Galilee. Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah about this beginning:

“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.”

God's dream doesn't begin at the top of the ladder with the powerful. Galilee was not the center of power or prestige. It was a working region—fishing villages, manual labor, crowded homes, uncertain income. People lived close to the edge. Galilee was a borderland—economically stressed and culturally mixed. A place where soldiers were a common sight and hope was not. It was a

place where people lived with **limited options and constant pressure**.

And the kind of darkness these people were living in was not just spiritual confusion; it was oppression, poverty, fear, and systemic neglect. Darkness is what settles over communities that feel forgotten and where futures feel predetermined.

Imagine walking into a room you've never been in before. It has no windows, no lamps, not even the glow from a phone screen. You stretch out your hands, moving slowly, afraid of what you might hit. In the dark, even familiar things feel dangerous.

- Darkness changes how we move.
- Darkness changes how we trust.
- Darkness changes what we believe is possible.

Continuing darkness often creates a quiet resignation that feels like reality. And **THIS** is the place where Jesus starts.

Jesus doesn't scold people for living in a land of darkness nor does he tell them to go somewhere else.

He doesn't cast blame or wait for people to come into the light—**he brings the light to them**. God's dream of justice always begins with **presence**.

Think about how light works. Light doesn't argue with darkness. It doesn't negotiate. It simply shows up—and darkness retreats.

- When a streetlight is on in a neglected neighborhood, people walk differently.
- When a lamp is lit in a refugee camp, children study.
- When connectivity comes to a rural village, businesses open, and futures expand.

God's justice works like that, too. It **changes what people can see**, and therefore what they believe is possible.

Where the world sees "lost causes," God sees places ready for illumination. Darkness is not where God is absent. Darkness is where God is *most active*.

It's here in this dark place of Galilee that Jesus' preaches his first sermon.

"Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Near means close enough to touch. Close enough to disrupt routines and realities.

Jesus message to repent is about reorientation, not shame. It's like realizing you've been carrying a heavy pack for miles, only to discover it's full of things you don't actually need. Repentance is setting it down—not because you're bad, but because you're tired, because you now see differently.

Social justice begins when we stop normalizing what exhausts and excludes people and start asking, Is this **really** how God dreams the world should work?

Then, we hear Jesus' call. **“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”** Jesus calls fishermen—working-class folks--people who know long nights, empty nets, and economic vulnerability.

He does not discard their skills and experiences; he **reclaims and repurposes them.**

Fishing for people is learning to notice—noticing who is barely keeping their head above water:

- the coworker who's always “fine,”
- the neighbor who no longer steps outside,
- the family member who's grown quiet.

Justice begins with attention. Attention to people, circumstances, community, and the environment.

Then we see the response to Jesus' call:

“Immediately they left their nets.”

Nets can be jobs, habits, or routines, as well as assumptions, privileges, or fears. Nets keep us safe—but they can also keep us stuck. Responding to Jesus' call means that our personal “nets” are not the most important consideration in our decision to follow.

The most important thing is being with Jesus. PAUSE

Watching...hearing...being present.

In our Gospel, Jesus is now

- Proclaiming the good news that God is present
- Teaching what the reign of God looks like
- Healing diseases and sickness

Jesus connects faith with life, belief with practice, and worship with justice.

God's dream is not partial healing—it is **wholeness** where justice is determined by outcomes **for all**.

There's another aspect of the dream of God from today's reading in Corinthians. In this Scripture, St. Paul turns our attention inward, to the church itself and says, "I appeal to you... that there be no divisions among you."

Essentially, he's saying "You cannot proclaim the reign of God while practicing exclusion."

The Corinthian church was divided by loyalty, status, and power. These divisions were showing up **in daily life**, especially around meals.

In the ancient world, hospitality revealed:

- Who belonged.
- Who was invited.
- Who arrived late.

- Who ate well.
- And, who went hungry.

When Paul says, “Each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’” he is naming divisions that shaped **welcome and exclusion** in the church at Corinth.

Hospitality is where justice becomes visible. When the church practices genuine welcome and engagement, it is clearly saying that **belonging is not earned—it is given**. Hospitality is not about niceness; it is about shared life.

When Paul pleads for unity, he is pleading for a community where no one wonders, *Do I really belong here?*

As Paul continues speaking to the church, he asks a most piercing question:

“Has Christ been divided?” PAUSE

The cross of Christ is where all our comparisons fall apart. At the cross, there are no resumes. No VIP passes. No outsiders.

Everyone comes in need. Working folks, retired folks, people of means and those without, the citizen and the immigrant alike. All are included.

The cross is where we all come as we are. Hospitality and welcome rooted in the cross refuse ranking and competition. Justice begins when we stop protecting our place at the table and start making room.

God's dream is that no one must wonder if there's room for them.

Paul makes this even clearer when he says..."The message of the cross is foolishness... but to us... it is the power of God."

The cross looks foolish because it practices hospitality the world rejects:

- Welcoming the unwanted
- Centering the overlooked
- Bearing the cost of engagement

The cross shows us that God's justice does not protect privilege; it **opens space**. Justice reshapes **who speaks, who leads, and who is heard**. To put it simply,

Justice pulls up a chair.

Hospitality keeps the seat open. PAUSE

God's dream of justice is not an idea or theory. It is real action

that looks like:

- Light and hope entering neglected places
- Healing and care for bodies broken by violence, bigotry and poverty
- Hospitality that reshapes power

Justice does not begin with grand gestures.

It begins with **who we notice, who we include**, and **who we make space for**. As Mother Theresa reminded us, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

God’s dream of justice is persistent and consistent.

It sounds like Jesus saying, “Follow me.” It means acknowledging the darkness and following Christ there. It looks like leaving our nets—those things that keep us from risking for God’s dream.

It sounds like Paul saying, “Make room.” It looks like pulling up another chair when the table feels full. It means acting when it is easier to stand apart and do nothing.

This time in history will be remembered as one in which the rich got richer and the poor became poorer. A time when lies, chaos and corruption were overtaking our institutions. A time unaccountable agents of the state were unleashed brutalize citizens and immigrants alike. It is a dark time and the end is not clear.

And yet, darkness is where God shows up. God’s light in us shines in darkness. And, God’s dream continues wherever God’s people choose presence over distance, hospitality over division, and the cross over power.

So today, where is Jesus calling you? What action can you take to bring light today or this week? What net do you need to lay aside to follow?

May we be people who embody light, practice welcome, raise our voices, and live out the dream of God—until justice feels less like a worthy idea and more like home...and God's dream becomes visible in the world God loves. **AMEN.**