

September 9, 2007

God and Country

Romans 13:1-10

The United States is a dream...

a vision... an ideal...

a bold experiment, not replicated anywhere else on earth.

We are a unique people who hold dear an impossible blend of ideals:

equality under the law...

freedom and liberty for all...

justice ringing from shore to shore...

the pursuit of happiness as anyone's birthright,

one nation under God - the God in whom we trust.

We citizens form fierce loyalties.

We demonstrate extraordinary bravery in time of testing.

Yet we grow speechless when asked to define our country's greatness.

And most of us could not put our finger on what lies at our culture's core.

We are known for our **generosity**, our **openness**, our **compassion**.

And no matter how tired we get of unending political debates,

or as exasperated we grow over contentious wrangling over moral issues

like abortion,

same-sex marriages,

immigration law

or the war in Iraq,

we remain a people who trust in the stability of our government and

the strength of our banks, businesses, schools, churches, and postal

system.

We have here come to worship God.

But today we also think about being part of a country, a great country,
worthy of respect, demanding our best.

God and country - two themes that stir our passions like none other.

Religion and politics - two subjects that start passionate discussion.

We are come here as people of faith, joined with millions of other peoples of
faith, in many countries, loving God who asks of us our best.

In Des Moines and Ames there are twenty-five churches, synagogues and
religious fellowships that make up an organization called AMOS - (A Mid-
Iowa Organizing Strategy). We are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and
Unitarian. Some are more liberal. Others are more conservative. Some
speak English. Some speak Spanish. We come from large and small groups.
We are like the United States - a grand mix of peoples united around a
dream.

In recent months about a thousand of us have met in homes and in houses of
worship to identify the things that we think need improving. Now we are
researching some of those things. People of faith in Ames and Des Moines
have lifted up:

health care,

immigration,

youth and education, and

economic justice

as causes we believe to be important, on which we can take action.

We don't know exactly what to do yet but we are working on that. We have formed research teams made up of people from all the Ames AMOS religious groups. We have read books, talked to community leaders, hospital CEO's and financial officers, sheriffs and chiefs of police, educators, editors, politicians and preachers, business people and homeless people.

In October we will propose an **agenda** to take to all the presidential candidates. We dream the American dream. We are quick to compassion. We trust in the goodness of our common life. We believe in justice for all.

Mary Jane and I are preaching this fall about "Living Christian in the World" as part of the AMOS emphasis in these twenty-five religious groups. You'll see this same bulletin cover for the next six weeks. We're inviting a series of speakers in the Adult Forum to talk with us about youth and education, economic justice, poverty, immigration, healthcare and the like. Vic Moss, from the Emergency Residence Project spoke with us this morning. We all want to live Christian in the world. A Sunday adult class takes up themes in current issues of our magazine, DisciplesWorld - which has devoted whole issues to children's welfare, poverty in a land of plenty, and biblical faith in a contemporary world. The church's job is to equip us to do that most powerfully. You might want to take advantage of some great classes.

Churches exist to serve the world in the name of Jesus.

At our best churches make life better in the countries where Christians live. We are reconcilers, healers, servants at the forefront of compassion, people of goodwill, and lovers of peace.

We have clear instruction in Scripture about being subject to the governing authorities - for authorities create public order. Order is at the heart of creation. As long as the governing authorities do not try to become God, citizens owe them obedience.

In the same way, however, churches must remember that their own agenda around issues like gay rights

or abortion

or biblical inerrancy

or immigration law

or creationism

or whatever,

no matter how strongly they believe it,

does **not** make it the will of God.

In the United States there is no such thing as a Christian vote,

or a non-Christian vote.

Jesus said almost nothing about government except for the question about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus never told any government how to behave. He did not follow the precedent of the prophets who told kings what to do. He only said to give the government its due.

That does **not** mean that the Bible leaves us without guidance in public issues. We are **repeatedly** commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus' compassion for the poor speaks to the entirety of life, including our politics. We simply have no rules to tell us which political positions to support and

which candidates to endorse. In the Christian Church we do not make rulings on such things as a matter of Christian conviction. In a democratic society, (something entirely unknown in biblical times), we have a responsibility, as citizens, to contribute to the common good. As persons of faith we exercise our conscience, even when our conscience leads us to fervently hold differing political opinions. As long as we walk humbly together before God, seeking justice for all, as persons of mercy and faith we will be all right. For, the truth is, God's truth is greater than our own. Christians are united in Christ who reached out to all kinds of people: prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, rich landowners, women and men, Jews and Gentiles. Good religion and good politics ask that we do the same.

I have noticed that there are two groups - each about the same size - that come into this building regularly. The first group is **you**, those persons who gather for worship on Sunday morning. The second group is those who come here for help in one form or another. Mostly those people do not attend on Sunday but they claim us as their church, draw on our resources, look to us for Christian compassion. Perhaps that's about the right ratio: 50-50. If we all came on Sunday we'd be hard pressed to find seating for everyone. If any of us were not part of the fellowship we couldn't be the compassionate community which we have become in Ames, in Iowa, in the United States.

You, my friends, have done well. You have been responsible and wise, welcoming and bold. We are good church together with a heart for the gospel and a passion for faithful living. You do know, don't you, that the church is engaged in a battle for the soul of the world - creation and order or

destruction and chaos. The AMOS groups working together, speak powerful words and create changes in our public life for the common good. It is all part of the American dream. It deserves our support.

Remember what Paul wrote about Christian behavior?

- be subject to the governing authorities.
- do what is good
- pay your taxes
- respect those to whom respect is due and honor those to whom honor is due
- keep the commandments: no adultery, no murder, no theft, no coveting
- and love one another, for love fulfills the law.

Dear church, because we love Jesus, because Christ loves us, we have the **audacity** to actually think that we can go out into society and love one another. Amen.

²¹You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien,
for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

²²You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.

²³If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me,
I will surely heed their cry;

²⁴my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword,
and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

²⁵If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you,
you shall not deal with them as a creditor;
you shall not exact interest from them.

²⁶If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the
sun goes down; ²⁷for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover;
in what else shall that person sleep?

And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien. Repeated commands in Exodus, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Jeremiah, Isaiah, indeed, throughout the Old Testament warn people not to discriminate against economic or political refugees. The Jews, as they are so often reminded, were once aliens themselves, in the land of Egypt. They are commanded to treat fairly aliens in the land. Jesus would echo ancient commands in his teaching, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." It was, for him, a condition of judgment. The attainment of justice for all is important for us in these days of heightened concerns about and for resident aliens. What scripture says guides us. What Christians in this democracy say is important for biblical influences the public debate and the legislative process.

How, do you suppose, people got to be resident aliens in biblical times?

Mostly they were forced.

- Their homes were overrun by a conquering army and they were dragged into slavery.
- Or they had wandered, following flocks or herds, into pleasant places, settled there, and - generations later - political tides changed; others came to rule the land, and they became aliens on the ground possessed by their ancestors.

Ask the Comanche, Apache, Lakota, Iowa, Cherokee or Navaho about that.

Where did your ancestors come from? Germany? Norway? England?
Holland? Scotland? Mexico? Africa? South Korea? Vietnam? Peru?

Why did they come?

Was there a war that forced them from home to become refugees?

Was there a famine that drove them off the land in search of food?

Did some persecution or prosecution threaten their safety?

How were they treated when they came to the United States?

Did they have to change their name? Or their faith? Or the kind of work they did?

Did they have to learn English?

Did they settle in a city near others like them, forming a neighborhood, or a ghetto, or a barrio?

Did they want to move here or were they forced to come?

Did somebody cram them on a ship then stand them on an auction block to sell them to the highest bidder?

Or were they driven from home by desperation to find work so they could feed their children?

The Digby's came here from England in the early 1700's, settling in Georgia, to pursue a religious dream of helping debtors start a new life in the New World. The latest Digby to immigrate is my son, Nathan, who is living as a resident alien in Ecuador where he lives with his wife outside Quito.

Two great themes run like a plumb line through scripture.

You could call them love and law.

The first is **God's steadfast love** for all of creation, including the earth and all its fullness.

Because God loves, we love in return.

Living in obedience to God means we become people of love. It's the way that works. It lies at the heart of creation.

God's very nature is love, a never-failing, never-ending love.

Compassion, which is how God hears the cries of suffering people, comes from love.

The second great theme of scripture is **God's idea of justice**. God cares about how people who have power treat people who don't. God is concerned about the treatment of aliens, widows, orphans, and those who are destitute. God cares about our quality of life of all persons.

The Bible contains much more about *God's* idea of justice and *God's* way of love than any other subjects - including salvation, sexuality, or sin.

To ensure justice we have politics.

Politics is the exercise of power. Just politics gets everyone a fair chance. Since people almost never willingly give up power or privilege, decent governments make laws to balance the scales between privilege and poverty.

Law requires the sword for enforcement.

Police protect the innocent, settle disputes, and promote domestic tranquility. The courts pronounce the payment, penalty, or punishment.

Love requires a relationship for enhancement.

Neighbors talk to each other to settle disputes because they want to preserve peace in the neighborhood and pleasantness among friends.

Religion demands justice for aliens, widows, orphans, and paupers.

Law decides how to attain it.

There have always been two cultures in our society:

the culture of inclusion and the culture of exclusion.

In the culture of inclusion lies our dream of life, liberty and justice for all. Our great social reforms in women's rights, civil rights, child labor laws, and institutions to promote the common good are part of inclusion. Welcome is granted. Opportunity is created. The American ideal is promoted.

Alongside that society there lies the culture of exclusion. Exclusion flourishes in land grabs, Jim Crow laws, racial segregation, restrictive housing arrangements and "separate but equal" schools. People are shut out because of their race, sex, class, economic strata, age, language, religion, physical abilities or education.

Opinions and convictions about immigration have always stood in the middle between these two cultures. We are a nation of immigrants. The culture of inclusion seeks to find a way to welcome the tired, poor and huddled masses. The culture of extremism seeks to protect those who are here and the social fabric they have created.

Every group establishes boundaries. We need them. Boundaries are walls, glass ceilings, fences and borders. They are language lines and dietary laws. They are necessary to promote just relationships.

When we use boundaries to protect weaker people from domination by stronger people they serve great purpose.

When, however, we use them to shore up the privileges of the strong against the weak they hurt all of society.

God commanded just treatment of resident aliens, widows, orphans and poor people because all persons in a society rise or fall together. Exploitation, good in the short term for the powerful, destroys everyone, in the long term. A government built on greed and corruption harms all its peoples and will not endure, should not endure.

Religion which takes seriously the love of God, the compassion by which God hears the cries of those who suffer, which seeks the best, highest common good, speaks powerfully to law and public order.

It is not the place of a sermon to say what our public policy should be in the face of twelve-million undocumented workers in the United States, who have come here at personal risk, who live here learning our ways and culture, for the simple reason that they are compelled to put food on the table and clothes on their children's backs. It is, however, the place of faithful people to insist out in the streets, editorial pages of the paper, and in the media, state house, and caucuses and primaries the state that compassion be shown, reason be followed, and justice be sought. God asks that. Love requires it. Jesus, who spent his life in the culture of inclusion, teaches it.

May God bless us with wisdom and courage as we seek to be faithful Christians and good citizens.

I Was Naked 9-23-07
by Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Today is the third Sunday in our series about "Living Christian in the World." In this six week series, David and I are addressing issues where faith and politics mix. Not in a partisan way; not in a way that says you should vote this way or that. But as citizens of this nation and as Christians, we have both a right and a responsibility to exercise our power in a way that reflects our values and our faith. Our hope through this sermon series is to promote deeper thinking, reflection and dialogue on important, sometimes complex, issues.

In the time leading up to the 2004 election, we heard a lot in the media about morals and values. And there were some religious leaders who seemed to be the only ones defining what constitutes Christian moral values. For those leaders, it seemed to boil down to two issues: abortion and homosexuality. Now I won't suggest those aren't important issues. But there are issues that are much more prominent in

scripture, preached about at length by Jesus, that got no press-time, nor pulpit-time but which are at the core of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and which need to enter the values discussion.

Jim Wallis is an evangelical preacher and writer who has a deep concern about justice. He was one of the preachers at the Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada which took place in Ft. Worth, TX this summer. Years ago I heard him tell the story of when he was a seminary student in Chicago. He and his seminary friends decided to do an experiment. They made a study of every single reference in the whole Bible to the poor, to God's love for the poor, to God being the deliverer of the oppressed. They found thousands of verses on the subject. Thousands of verses. In the Old Testament care of the poor was the second most prominent theme. The first was idolatry and often those two themes were connected.

One of Jim Wallis' buddies decided to make a visual of what they'd found. So, he took an old Bible and a pair of scissors. He cut every

reference to the poor out of the Bible. It took him a very long time. And when he was done, the Bible was in shreds. It was literally full of holes. Wallis describes it this way, "When he was done, the Bible was very different...In the gospels, he came to Mary's wonderful song where she says, "The mighty will be put down from their thrones, the lowly exalted, the poor filled with good things and the rich sent empty away. Of course, you can guess what happened to that. In Matthew 25, the section about the least of these, that was gone. Luke 4, Jesus' very first sermon, what I call his Nazareth manifesto, here he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...that was gone, too." When you take all reference to the poor out of the Bible, there is barely enough left to hold it together. So, when we think about the values of our faith, poverty and the plight of the poor has to be a part of the discussion if it is to have any integrity.

Once upon a time there was a wise man who used to go to the

ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work. One day he was walking along the shore. As he looked down the beach, he saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself to think of someone who would dance to the day. So he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young man and the young man wasn't dancing, but instead he was reaching down to the shore, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?"

The young man paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing starfish in the ocean." "I guess I should have asked, why are you throwing starfish in the ocean?" "The sun is up and the tide is going out. And if I don't throw them in they'll die." "But, young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!" The young man listened politely. Then bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea,

past the breaking waves and said, "It made a difference to that one."

That story is a favorite. Maybe you've heard it before. I think it is so well liked and so often quoted because it speaks an important truth about the nature of compassion. Compassion is deeply personal, and it matters. In our scripture this morning, Jesus makes that point as well when he, with much passion, says, "just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me"... and, conversely, he said, "just as you did **not** do it to one of the least of these, you did **not** do it to me." Caring about those in need; those on the margins of society, matters. It reflects on one's character and one's faith, and Jesus takes it both seriously and personally.

There is a saying, "A society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens." That's pretty much what Jesus said in Matthew 25. One of the most vulnerable groups of people both in Bible times as well as now, are the children. Do you know that the number of children living in poverty in this country is on the rise... at the same time there

are more millionaires? About 1 in 6 children in the United States lives in poverty, about half of those live in extreme poverty. And if you're black, that number is 1 in 3 children living in poverty. Living in poverty means you are hungry and thirsty and sick and without clothes, and, down the road, it may mean you'll be in prison, too. Poverty is a terrible symptom of the problems of a nation.

Now I know that you all care about people. I know you help provide food and clothes and other kinds of assistance for people in need. And in doing that, we, as a church are truly helping people. And it matters and it makes a difference to that person in need. When you don't have enough money to buy groceries to feed your family today or to buy gas to get your kids to the doctor tomorrow, it does make a difference to that person that they can come to First Christian Church for help. David and I have many stories of grateful people who leave the church with a tear in their eye and hope in their heart because of the kindness we try to show in the name of Jesus.

But I have to tell you, it is difficult to see the same person come in and need help time after time, who, it seems, can never get ahead - always just barely getting by. It makes me both sad and frustrated to hear how a single mom has had to move her family several times within the last year, how she tries to work, but cannot make enough to pay the bills and when she is working, how she cannot provide adequate supervision for her children after school who then get into trouble. And I am able to help with some food and gas, but at the same time, I know that won't go very far and it won't get her out of poverty.

These kinds of encounters have made me reflect on the story of the starfish in a new way. I am convinced that if that young man stayed out on the beach day after day, eventually he'd want to go and figure out why so many starfish are washing up on shore in the first place. At that point, compassion leads to asking the deeper question of what is causing the situation and what can prevent it in the future.

A couple of weeks ago, during an adult Sunday School forum, Vic

Moss, director of the Emergency Residence Project here in Ames spoke. He talked about how his organization and facility has grown over the years. That is certainly something to celebrate, except for the fact that the need has grown faster than the facility and resources. He simply can't keep up with the need. He spoke almost apologetically saying, "You're not going to like what I have to say." The problem of poverty and homelessness is increasing. Even though unemployment numbers are low, he says, that is deceiving because the jobs are so low paying that a family simply can't live on the wages they earn. In Vic's job, he is like the young man throwing the starfish back into the water, and it does make a difference and he is helping and the Emergency Residence Project is worth our support.

But, Vic also tells us that policy and priorities need to change if we care about poverty and the poor. People need to be able to earn a living wage so they can afford a place to live and so they can feed and clothe their children. If we value families, we must start asking the

questions, what are we doing in order to enhance and encourage healthy, stable environments in which children can grow and become empowered, caring, contributing, members of churches and society in general. If we care, we are not content with offering food and clothing and a drink without also asking how the system needs to be changed in order to prevent poverty from happening in the first place or how can things be changed in to give individuals and families a good chance of getting out of poverty.

As we think about choosing a candidate to run for president of the United States, maybe we should ask about how they envision creating a society where poverty is eliminated and where people are valued and respected and where children can thrive. Maybe we ought to listen as candidates speak to how they view the "least of these" about which Jesus refers. That is an issue of values. For as you do to the least of these, so you do to Jesus. May we be among those whom Jesus blessed, not for our sake, but for the sake of the world. Amen.

Loving One's Enemies - In an Age of Terrorism

⁴³"You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

⁴⁴But I say to you,
Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?
Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,
what more are you doing than others?
Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.



Love my **ENEMY**?

No way!

Even if Jesus said it, it's one of those things that just isn't done.

Enemies hurt us. They disturb or destroy us.

Enemies slander our characters and bomb our buildings.

It is not normal to love those people. It is normal to hate them.

We take vengeance on them to make them fear us.

We take power over enemies to make ourselves safer.

- Think of how you felt on 9/11/2001.
- Think of how you felt on the playground when confronted by some bully.

- Think of how you felt sitting there in the courtroom, hearing allegations thrown against you.
- Think of how you felt when the enraged motorist ran you off the road, stopped and shouted at you.
- Think of how you felt when that in-law, that ex-friend, that former partner turned on you with cold fury.

Love an enemy?

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

Of course we've heard it said.

We heard it on the streets and in the parlors of common sense.

But we did not hear it from the Bible.

We never heard it in either Jewish or Christian religious teaching.

The Bible never says we should hate our enemies. It says the opposite.

- Deuteronomy 22:4 and Exodus 23:4-5 both say:
⁴When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. ⁵When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

Do the right thing. Do the right thing by the ox or donkey even when you'd rather see your enemy suffer. That's what the Bible says.

- Leviticus 19:17-18 says,
¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The question is, "Who are your kin, these neighbors whom you must love?"

They are, of course, your fellow Israelites.

They worship the same God you worship and keep the same laws you keep.

Everyone else is not your kin and not your neighbor.
You are commanded to treat them fairly.
You do not have to love them. They do not worship your God.
They are not your people.

But Jesus went against the old teachings.
Jesus expanded the circle and said our neighbor is anybody who needs us.
In a most fundamental way Jesus turned the way we should be in the world in relationship with people who are our people and those who are not our people upside down and he made it core.

He said loving enemies lies at the heart of a life given to loving God.

Roman soldiers strutting arrogantly,
tax collectors taking what they want greedily,
temple priests and scribes wielding authority hypocritically,
and people like half-breed Samaritans, dirty beggars, unbelieving foreigners,
unclean lepers and demon-possessed outcasts: Jesus said, "Love them."

The love Jesus had in mind is not feelings. It is love shown in actions: returning the lost animal, freeing the suffering beast - even when it belongs to your enemy. Loving the Roman soldier and face-slapping bully is never a warm, fuzzy thing. So love is expressed in how we behave: walk a second mile, stand up before the persecutor without striking back. **To negative relationships Jesus commands positive response.**

Why would he say a thing like that?

I think he commanded it because such love is the hope of the world.

His world knew as much of terror and cruelty as ours, was as brutal as ours, and death came as quickly as in ours. In spite of that Jesus intended his followers to pay attention to what he said. In a brutal, frightening, cruel world, Jesus commanded his people to love their enemies.

He based his command,
not on an ideal of universal human rights
or a strategy to win the enemy over,
but on the nature of God who loves everyone impartially.

Jesus asked us to love like God loves. God sends sunshine on the good and the bad and rain on the fair and the unfair. God behaves with love for all. Such love lies at the core of creation.

We are all God's children.

Even those who are not our people,
who do not worship our God,
who do not look like us, think like us, behave like us, or believe like us are God's children equally with us.

What we do to love them, said Jesus, is a judgment issue.

It is also an issue that decides, especially in an age like this when weapons of mass destruction rain down death from the skies, the future of civilization.

Were we to find a way to love enemies instead of seeking ways to destroy them it would change the moral balance. Jesus never said enemies will become friends. But he did believe that in not resisting violence with violence is the only way to change the course of the world. His path of resistance, creative, non-violent, subversive of the domination of the world seems futile and foolish, at first. But it survives. We remember Jesus every day and Pontius Pilate only because of him. The sword has its place in the creation of justice but it can never long govern a people and never will rule their hearts. God loves the just and unjust, sends all of us what we need to survive, loves all of us, waits for all of us in hope that we will finally come to learn the lessons of love.

Jesus commands his followers to do the same. Love enemies. You are blessed when they persecute you for the sake of righteousness. You are blessed when they revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil

against you falsely on his account. For you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Pray for enemies. Behave lovingly with them. Give hungry enemies food. They, no less than you, are God's children.

Be perfect.

Greeks thought of perfection as being without blemish, fault or defect.

Jews thought of perfection as being made whole, made complete.

Being perfect, for Jews, is a peaceableness through all the ambiguities and brokenness this life. God is perfect. Our perfection lies, in part, in our willingness to love enemies.

Broken Bread - Reconciled Body 10-7-07

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Divisions between people have been with us since the beginning.

It seems to be human nature to divide ourselves, to put some people outside the group and some inside. Those on the inside, of course, are the ones who are deserving or righteous or better somehow. Those on the outside, of course, are the ones who are undeserving or unrighteous or not as good somehow. And there are always lots of rules, some spoken and some unspoken that put some people above other people. And, of course, its always the people on top who are defining the rules.

Jesus and his early followers were well aware of divisions; woman and men, slave and free, Gentile and Jew, children and adults, poor and rich. And there were all kinds of rules in order to keep these groups separated from one another and in their proper place within society. And there was a pecking order, if you will. And if you were among the fortunate group, say an adult free Jewish male, you certainly wouldn't

mix with someone considered beneath you lest you be made impure.

Then came Jesus. He was from the class of adult free Jewish male. He was, in a way, a golden boy, learning from the religious leaders, knowing scripture. The only problem was, from his position of privilege, he freely associated with those considered beneath him.

Jesus broke the rules. He ate with the righteous and the unrighteous alike. He touched and healed the clean and the unclean alike. He spoke with Jews and Gentiles, men and women. He even told the disciples to let the children come to him. It's hard to understand in our day just how radical that was in Jesus' day!

Jesus ministry and mission was to tear down walls and reconcile people to one another and to God. And he never veered from that focus even as he faced death on a cross. And in that act of selfless giving for the sake of a greater good, Jesus brought us together, in all our differences, into one body, broken for all. In Jesus, we see that the distinctions we make among us are superficial and not of God. There is

a piece of the Ephesians scripture that comes before the part I read, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

In Christ we see that we are all beloved children of God and that we do not earn that love - it is a gift. We do not achieve salvation. We do not earn points. And it's not a competition. We do not get a rank in the eyes of God. We are simply loved with a greater love than we deserve and than we can ever repay. So, as beloved children of God, we are given a life of abundant love to share with whomever we meet regardless of their place in society so that we, like Jesus, might help tear down walls that divide people from one another, that we might be part of Christ's reconciling work in our time.

Unfortunately, Christians haven't always been good at following Jesus' example of self-giving, wall destroying, reconciling love to all.

There are numerous examples throughout history where the majority of Christians were helping to build the walls instead of tearing them down. Last night a group of us gathered here at church to watch the movie, *Amistad*, about a revolt on a slave ship and the subsequent trial of those captured. It is hard in our day to imagine how anyone who called themselves a follower of Jesus could condone or support slavery in any way. These African people were kidnapped from their homes and villages and taken half way around the world to be sold like property. And there were "good" Christian people who owned slaves and didn't see how wrong and against the very life of Jesus it was. But there were other Christians, as the movie pointed out, who worked tirelessly to reconcile people and let the slaves go free.

The injustice and inhumanity of the whole system of slavery in this country still haunts us today. Though the church was instrumental in gaining civil rights for African Americans, there was also much resistance among white Christians. Tim's grandfather, Harper Will, who

was a popular preacher in the Civil Rights era told of the time he was invited to be a guest preacher in a church in the south in the 1960's. The way I heard the story, the representative of the Church where he was to speak said, "We want you to come and preach, and you can preach on any subject you like, except the race issue." To which Harper Will responded, "Then I guess I'll be preaching on the race issue." And he did. Not because it was popular, but because he served Jesus Christ who broke down the walls that divided people and reconciled people to one another and to God. God's love is enough for all. That is the Gospel which saves and frees people. That is the gospel to which we are all called.

If you've been following the news, you know that the work of reconciliation between the races in this country is not over. There is a great deal of racial tension, indeed. A few weeks ago there was a peaceful demonstration among blacks in Jena, LA due to what looks to be an unequal application of the law and an unwillingness to address

racial tension within that community. A couple of days ago, the headline of the Des Moines Register read, "Prisons' racial disparity raises new debate." In this article we discover that the percentage of black Iowans incarcerated for drug-related crimes is on the rise as white incarceration is on the decline. A couple of weeks ago I shared the alarming statistic that one in three black children in this country live in poverty. All of these are signs that there is much reconciliation work to be done as we seek to live out and make real the unity in Christ we celebrate this day.

We live in a world where there is much that divides us. As followers of Christ, we have a high calling to be ones who unite and who share God's love and grace given freely to us, not by our own doing, but as a gift of God. Too often, however, Christians are seen as the ones creating division and building walls. Recently, there was an article in Time Magazine which suggests that Christianity has been leaving a bad impression in recent years. Nine out of ten non-Christians see

Christianity as too judgmental, too hypocritical and too anti-homosexual. The survey also found that churchgoers share many of the same concerns. Ronald Goetz, Professor of Theology at Elmhurst College in Illinois writes, "Whenever Christians seriously grapple with the question of who should be included as full and equal partners in the commonwealth of God...Paul's words about Christ having 'broken down the dividing wall of hostility' ought to provide - and in moments of grace have provided - a powerful impetus toward the destruction of the various prejudicial barriers."

Today, in addition to our regular offering, we also take up a special offering - an offering to continue the ministry of Reconciliation through the work of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) both regionally and nationally. This offering is all about breaking down prejudicial barriers. This offering recognizes that the work of reconciliation is difficult and takes time and attention and resources. The ministry of reconciliation is ongoing and part of who we are as Christians who follow

the way of Jesus. It is foundational as it brings our faith alive in practical ways. You are invited to support this offering and to be a channel of healing and wholeness where there is brokenness. You are invited to give taking seriously the notion that Christ came to proclaim peace and to bring reconciliation among the peoples.

Today is also World Communion Sunday. A day when we celebrate with people all over the world that the borders and walls that divide us have been torn down through Jesus Christ. Today, we celebrate that Spirit which unites us and makes us one with strangers and neighbors, enemies and friends, those near by and those far away, those who are much like us and those who are quite different. As the refrain to a favorite hymn of mine goes, "For we are strangers no more, but members of one family; strangers no more, but part of one humanity; strangers no more, we're neighbors to each other now; strangers no more, we're sisters and we're brothers now." May it be so. Amen.

¹Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.

²They began to accuse him, saying,

“We found this man perverting our nation,
forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor,
and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”

³Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

He answered, “You say so.”

⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds,

“I find no basis for an accusation against this man.”

⁵But they were insistent and said,

“He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea,
from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean.

⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction,
he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.

⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see
him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see
him perform some sign. ⁹He questioned him at some length,
but Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him.

¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him;
then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.

¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before
this they had been enemies.

What a powerful story!

Jesus got involved with politics, you know that. Now you have to trace in your mind's eye this story as is recorded in Luke's gospel .

There he is in the courtroom

- you can just see it as if it were on your television screen
- here are the accusers strutting back and forth to and fro
- it is their moment
- they know that at last - at long last - after all the plotting and scheming and planning - they've got him,

- they've got him where they want him - they are going

to squash him

- they have shouted and screamed and accused and had a great time

all night in an illegal courtroom session and now they are worked up into a feeding frenzy

- a blood lust and they've dragged him off to Pilot because you see they don't have the authority of the death penalty, but Pilot does.

So now we are changing into Pilot's courtroom and all of the accusers are there confident in their moment in their glory.

These charges, however, that they bring, are not the same charges that were offered in their court before.

These are political charges - Pilot doesn't care at all about religion.

So they scream, "He's a subversive".

Can you believe this? They're complaining, "He forbids us to pay taxes."

"He said he is our king! He is the king?"

"Oh, woe is us! Now we are confused. If Jesus is the king and we're not going to pay taxes, what do you think Caesar will think about that?"

Pilot got the message.

I begin to wonder what the back story is that led up to that courtroom scene must be.

How did it come to that moment?

Now maybe you would want to take another tack than the one I'm going to take and that's perfectly good,

but I think the reasons were all political,
they were not mostly religious.

Now it was the religious establishment in many ways that was out to get him because of a very fundamental difference in the way that people in religious power saw the life of the life of faith unfolding in the way Jesus saw it unfolding.

These are two old different ways of being political people in front of God.

For the Pharisees and for the Scribes and for some of the Sadducees, the way you please God, which is what you want to do, of course, the way that you please God is to observe the Commandments.

Those Commandments were not given on a whim,
they came down through Moses.

They were literally carved in stone, came down off the mountain.
There are ten of them, but over time people had expanded the
interpretation of those commandments to cover every conceivable
part of life because you want to have everything covered so that
you can please God.

And the trick is to be pure.

The trick is to keep yourself unstained by the wicked world.

You know how bad it is out there.

Well, the God-fearers are separated from all of that.

You just don't want to get involved with all that dirty business going out
on the road to sin and damnation.

The way to holiness is the narrow path - if don't break the rules, you
don't get in trouble. The rules are there to keep you on course so obey
all the Commandments all the time. That was the teaching. Jesus grew
up with that teaching.

Most people would have said, "You know that story that he told? -

that embarrassing obnoxious story that he told
about the priest and the Levite -

they are going down to Jericho to Jerusalem

- they are doing their thing

-they are going to perform their religious duties and they saw

that poor unfortunate lying there in a pool of blood, victim of some robbers,

they did the right thing,

they didn't defile themselves,

they didn't touch him,

they remembered their duties and they passed right on by -

that's what they should have done.

You don't get involved in corruption,

maybe that fellow had it coming because he did something wrong and

he was being punished. God expects you to keep yourself pure -

that's that line of thinking.

Of course, when Jesus told the story he disagreed with them and he praised the Samaritan, (of all people) , who came along and showed compassion.

That's what got Jesus in trouble every time because every time he chose the path of compassion and people didn't like it.

They said, "Hey, we saw you and your disciples walking through the grainfield and it was Sabbath, God's day, (remember the Lord's day to keep it holy), do not work on the Sabbath, and there they were picking up grain and harvesting grain and eating it. That's working on the Sabbath - you didn't even say anything to them and what's even worse

we saw you heal not one, but two or three people on the Sabbath, in fact, you made a deal out of it. You can't do that. If you want to heal somebody, wait until Monday, or Tuesday, or Wednesday. You have all these other times..."

Don't you know God intends us to see how the divide is beginning to split?

You want to keep yourself pure

- you certainly don't go eating with sinners
- and so what does Jesus do every time he gets a chance?

There is some sinner inviting him to a party and he goes.

And he seems to enjoy himself.

In fact, they look down their noses at him and they call him a wine-bibber and a glutton.

He's just enjoying those sinners way too much.

He's not keeping himself pure.

People like that are dangerous.

If you try to get people to live in a box that is prescribed by the rules, somebody like Jesus, who is out there actually experiencing joy is a threat.

For Jesus, obedience is important, let's be very clear about that, and he said not a tittle of the law will go unobserved, but obedience is not the primary thing - the primary thing is **compassion**.

Paul heard that word from Jesus and wrote in one of his letters,
"Put on then first, holy and beloved, God's chosen one, put on first
compassion, then kindness, then meekness, then love which binds all
things together in perfect harmony."

According to Jesus, "if you want to follow me, you have to be like this.
If you want to honor God, then the first thing you do is show mercy."

The kingdom of God, that reality that is so upside down from the world,
the kingdom of God breaks out every time one person reaches out to
another person in love. And it's a bold, imaginative kind of a way that
allows the possibility of relationship.

It's always that. In one of his arguments with the Pharisees and the
Scribes, Jesus criticized them for making mountains out of molehills.

"You folks," he said, "even tithe garden produce, your mint garden,
your herbs, your cumin, you count ten of those things and give God
when you are neglecting what really matters".

Three things he said really matter - mercy, justice and faith.

Well actually, he said justice, mercy and faith.

That's what's of primary importance, that's Matthew 23:23.

Justice, mercy and faith.

I began playing out in my mind what would it look like if a church,

if a whole congregation of people said,
"Ok, what ever else we are,
we will be a people of justice, mercy and faith because Jesus said
that's what's core.

How would it look if that congregation took Christianity out onto the street. I know that in every church there are people who live that way, who believe that way. And I know that in every church there are people who deeply believe because that is how they have been taught and they grew up and it makes sense to them that the way to please God is to be holy. And I believe that both groups in a church have a valuable and necessary word for each other.

The compassion people need to speak to the rule people because if the rule people are not counter-balanced religion becomes a set of prescriptions and the joy is just choked out of it.

You've seen people that way.

But, on the other hand, if the rule people speak to the compassion people because if you start playing fast and free with the rules you end up with this quagmire.

Both need to be there, but of the two if everybody agrees when the chips are down and you have to make a choice, always err on the side of compassion.

If you are the priest with big important religious duties that are going on and you have to get down there to the Temple to get it done, and you see somebody lying on the side of the road then the thing you do is stop and deal with that person because compassion demands it, that's what Jesus taught.

And that was political and it got him in trouble.

The other way, though, makes God too small.

It makes God mostly concerned about how well we toe the mark of some standard that's so impossibly high we'll never keep it anyway. And we don't believe in that kind of small, vindictive petty God. God doesn't care if we tithe our garden produce. God cares very much about the quality of our heart when we come back to say,

"I return to you knowing that everything I have is from you, but I tithe to say thank you. Here's my tithe."

That's what counts, what God wants is our hearts, not our percentage.

It's really hard for a little congregation to do almost anything on it's own. We can help one another be merciful, but we don't have a loud enough voice to be proclaimed out there on the streets of commerce that has any clout behind it around things like justice. But if the kingdom of God is rooted in justice and mercy and faith, then we have to figure a way to obtain justice.

I can think of no better congregation than this one

because I know how seriously you folks take your faith -

I have some understanding of how deeply is that conviction rooted in you that you are people that follow Jesus. I am so delighted and proud to be a part of a church that really is Christian. I think not all pastors can say that with the sincerity that I say that - I see how you struggle and live your faith - I commend you.

When we join with other faith communities of people who do not believe the same way we believe and might not follow Jesus the same way we follow because they are Unitarians or Roman Catholics or Baptists or other groups, but we join our voices with others about justice.

In the biblical understanding of justice, there is a power released that is the kingdom of God that flows right back into us as well as out from us. We were the first church in town to sign on to become one of the participating congregations of AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) and our people - you sat down around tables to talk about the kinds of things that upset us and we added those up and people in other churches and other groups sat down and had the same conversations and out of all of those 400 conversations came some issues that we think are big, important real issues about which we can do something in central Iowa.

And so, in all of those churches people are talking about justice in different ways. Mary Jane and I have been talking about immigration law and immigration rights and welcoming strangers and we've been talking about poverty and health care and how the system needs to be distributed or could be distributed. We've been talking about things like when Mary Jane preached about "When I was naked", and economic injustice that exists right here in central Iowa and God and country, how in the world do we be political Christians without being partisan.

How do we press to the deeper weightier matters of the law without getting caught up in whether we are going to be Democratic or Republican or libertarian or whatever. We intend to encourage one another to go to the polls and vote because that is a responsibility we have in a democratic society, but we also fully understand that some of us are going to cancel out some of the rest of us.

That is democracy at work, but when we go to the polls, every one of us goes mindful that with our checkmark we are also speaking for all of the widows and the orphans and the outcasts and the underclass, and the voiceless ones who cannot speak for themselves.

Politics, politics is power that is wielded in order to change or maintain civil order. Politics in and of itself is neither good or evil, it is power. It is the use of power and if people whose faith is as central to them

as it is us do not speak a political word not a personal word in a society then

other people will say that word and maybe some other people would not say the word that we believe that is to be said, therefore we think and study and research and speak - the Bible calls that bearing witness.

Now, in that story, here Jesus is in the courtroom and here are fifty high-priced attorneys strutting back and forth calling him all kinds of names and naming everything that he ever did that offended them.

I imagine the list goes on and on and on. And then they haul him over and he's in front of Pilot and Pilot has his royal magisterial attire and he's

probably sitting up high on a throne and Jesus is below all bloody and beat and doesn't look very innocent.

Do you think that Jesus could have, with his eloquence, engaged in an argument and won Pilot or won Herod over?

Do you think that Jesus could have by virtue of reason, changed the outcome of that courtroom scene?

Do you think that somehow out of the throes of the momentum of a process that was set in place months and months earlier when the Scribes and Pharisees and others began his death?

Do you think that could have been reversed at the bottom of the ninth?

Evidently Jesus did not think so and he maintained silence.

Do you think that it is at all interesting that the story is told and the memory of that courtroom drama is even preserved in our minds not because of Herod, but because of Jesus?

I think it was a political act somewhat not entirely along the same vein as a kid with a head cold and a nose full of mucous, sneezing into his hand and wanting to shake the hand of the bully who was tormenting him.

As we take our faith out into the streets where it really matters, as persons who follow Jesus, we do not have the option, (it would appear to me) to simply sit back and let the world go by, as we know no gain nor loss, but that we have voice and we have wits about us and we have intelligence in us and we have passions that drive us and to you and to me as we do those things together, my simple prayer is,

"Thanks be to God."

Choose compassion,
choose love, which binds all things together in perfect harmony.