

**Sermon, September 10, 2023**  
**Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20**  
**“The Journey Begins: What Is the Sign?”**  
**Rev. Nikki Baker, Lead Pastor**



**The Journey Begins: What Is the Sign**

Remember that cellular commercial “Can you hear me now?”

This week, we continue on our journey of faith. Today we’ll focus on signs. As disciples, we are always looking for signs of God’s presence in our lives and in the lives of others. And as we search for such signs, we are tuning into God’s signal. But as disciples, we are also called to *be* signs of God’s presence in the world. I’m wondering if you have seen such signs of God’s presence in your life.

This week, I encourage you to go to the First UMC Facebook page and share signs of God’s presence that you are seeing. How are you tuning into God’s signal on the daily?

When I was little, I remember watching Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. One of the things I remember about the show was the constancy of the beginning and the ending. Mr. Rogers entered the space with us, and from his work shoes to his sneakers and from his jacket to a colorful sweater—signs that he was ready to be present with us.

Have you ever had to change clothing for certain times or tasks?



Maybe you used to do something similar on Sundays, even—you had clothing that you would go to school or play in and then you had clothing that you would only wear to church. You kept your church clothing “nice.” And your behavior when you were in that clothing was expected to be “nice,” as well.

I don’t think that Jesus was looking for us to compartmentalize our faith in such a way. In fact, I don’t think Jesus wanted us to compartmentalize our faith at all! Being “nice” while we’re in the sanctuary, because that’s where we feel like we’re in the presence of God—only on Sundays, and being selfish for the rest of the week is not congruent with the way Jesus showed His disciples to live. We are to live every moment of every day as if we are in the presence of God. What does that mean for us? It means living to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We don’t only love our neighbors on Sundays, then forget about them the rest of the week.

Granted, we are busy human doings. We have work, we have family, we have homes to keep, interests to pursue, and relationships to give our attention to. So, we need to be reminded that as Christ followers, we are called to put on God’s grace every day. We have to intentionally tune our hearts to hear God’s grace. We do that tuning as we gather together to worship on Sundays as the body of Christ. In the world, we do that tuning as we search for and become signs of God’s grace through our daily living. We are the church on Sundays, and we are the church during the rest of the week. In other words...we wear our church clothes all the time.



In our Old Testament lesson from Exodus today, God is speaking to Moses and Aaron and telling them about a sign that will let God know to pass over their homes because they belong to Him on the night that He will execute judgements on all the gods of Egypt and their people. The blood of an unblemished male lamb would be placed on the lintel (the top part of the door frame) to signify that they are a house under God’s provision and care.

Symbolically, Jesus is that sign for us. He died without sin. And His life was poured out for us. When we claim Christ as our Savior, we stand under the lintel marked with His gift of grace. We belong to His family. We are no longer part of a crowd of individuals, we are part of a community. A community who has been and continues to be transformed by God’s grace.

Many wonder at the relevancy of church—“Why do I need church?”

The only gospel writer that used the word, “church” was Matthew. And the word, church, appears only twice in his gospel—at the passage today and the passage two weeks ago when Jesus says that it is on Peter, the rock, that He will build His “church.”

In Matthew's gospel, "church" is a place of building up and reconciliation. We worship God through acts of building up and reconciliation. As we gather to give God glory and proclaim trust in salvation through Jesus Christ, we gather to heal the brokenness of the world. We are actively participating with God in the healing of our relationship with God and with others.

Every time we come to the communion table, we are reminded that we come, not because we own the table, but because we've been invited by Christ Himself. And we are invited as His beloved community—those who seek to know Him better and who trust in His grace for our salvation. The church is evidence that living in this beloved community is the way God imagined and created humankind to live.



Sometimes we forget to leave our church clothes on all the time. I mean, aren't jeans and an old t-shirt more comfortable than a white collared shirt and dress pants? The jeans don't wrinkle or show dirt, and the old t-shirt has tears and stains and is worn and flexible—we don't have to worry about getting them dirty, they're already imperfect, right? We would

rather be comfortable in our messed up clothes—I mean lives—than have to think about every action we take, be intentional in every word we speak, or every thought we have. It is much easier to compartmentalize our faith. Our Sunday worship time is a clean space of one hour in which we are mindful of our thoughts, words and deeds. It is easier to set aside one hour than to wear our church clothes outside of church—with our families, our friends, our neighbors, and our work. Changing in and out of our church clothes is easier than being mindful all the time that being part of Christ's beloved community carries with it the responsibility to represent the family of God at all times. Think about it, it is a huge responsibility to represent the one who made us. But here's the good news: God doesn't expect our representation to be perfect. It is our purpose to live lives worthy of God's calling. This means that we live mindfully, not perfectly.

Being the church means that we live mindfully as a body that builds up every human being and works to reconcile every person to God and to one another. Reconciliation is the act of restoring to friendship or harmony. Reconciliation is coming to an understanding and putting an end to hostility. We work to repair broken relationships, close the chasms, build bridges, and unite people with God and one another. No small task, eh? So, how do we do that? What is our part? How do we intentionally live as Christ's beloved community in the here and now—even when we're doing it imperfectly? We seek reconciliation as we give

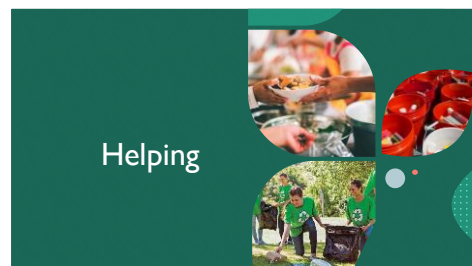


of ourselves, as we help and love others, as we adjust our lifestyles to care for our planet, as we advocate for just distribution of resources that God has given to us to steward, and as we stand with those in our time in society who have been pushed into the margins.

We give freely from the abundance we have received. We share our monetary resources, we share our time, we share our expertise or our talents, we share without considering what we may receive in return.

This is letting go of control. This may mean that if we're great with kiddos, we give up a Sunday in worship to help in Sunday School. It

may mean that we offer to purchase a meal for someone who can't pay for the meal themselves. Or even calling to encourage someone who is trying to recover from illness and is alone and discouraged. Second Saturdays at FUMC are perfect opportunities to help! We just did that yesterday and another is coming in October!



How did Jesus help people? How can we help? So many people are in need of just the kind of help we can offer! The first way to help is to listen and to ask what someone else might need. Jesus asked the man who couldn't walk, "What do you want Me to do for you?" Do they need a partner to call to check in daily as they recover from a surgery? Do they need a friend to listen? Maybe there is a need to drive someone who can't drive to an appointment or pick up groceries. Could you write a letter of encouragement to someone who is incarcerated?

Another way to build up and bring reconciliation is through loving. The most well-known Scriptures about love are from First Corinthians 13 and John 3:16-17. Love is patient and kind, it isn't envious, boastful or proud. It honors others, it is not self-seeking. Showing love means that we don't allow ourselves to rise to anger easily and we don't hold grudges. Love



rejoices in truthfulness, and it protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres. Love gives without counting the cost and doesn't condemn. If we understand love in these ways, love is freeing. We no longer have to close our fist around God's love to protect it for ourselves, but we can open our hand and let God's love expand to its full expression into the lives of all who desire to receive it.



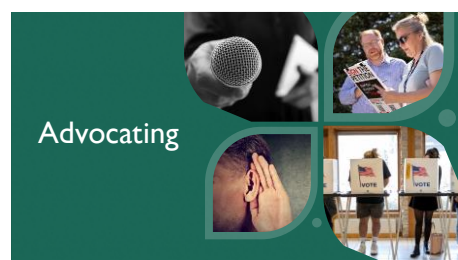
Another way that we bring reconciliation is through our lifestyles.

The brokenness of our world includes the brokenness that exists in



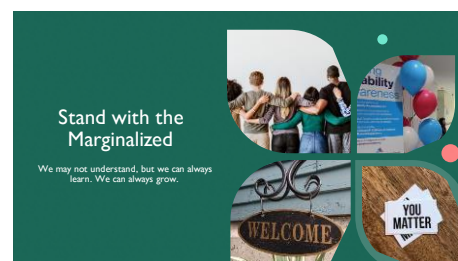
our environment. We do not simply exist in our own time for ourselves. The way we live now is both a product of generations that have lived before us and a legacy we will leave to generations after us. We cannot deny that more people are occupying more space and using more resources of our planet. It is essential for us to look beyond ourselves and our own desires to leave a legacy of good life and health for the generations that will follow us. Reducing our trash and waste, taking care of our waterways, considering the amount of energy we consume and the ways its use affects the environment, watching out for endangered species, reusing items, recycling materials so that we are not adding to landfills. All are adjustments to our lifestyle that can bring harmony and restoration to our home and leave a legacy of love for generations to come.

Building up and reconciliation can also happen through the ways that we listen to our neighbors, the ways we learn about those who are different from us socially, culturally, economically, and geographically. Just because Ohio is not suffering because of wildfires that ravaged Hawaii, does not mean we should not advocate for better infrastructure in Hawaii



so that people can receive the help they need. Or just because we have not experienced addiction through prescription opioids does not mean we shouldn't look at the way that opioids are distributed to patients in recovery and the monetary benefit the sale of those drugs have given some companies. Advocacy requires awareness, listening, a willingness to ask questions and speak up, and be civically responsible for our positions in utilizing our right to vote.

Jesus stood with the marginalized: the poor, the women, the children, the people possessed by evil spirits, the infirm, those who had disabilities, the ones considered socially unacceptable like tax collectors, lepers, and sinners. He named them. He went among them. He touched them. He spent time with them. And in the time He spent with them, He spoke reconciliation and love into their lives. His presence in the margins reminded them that they mattered to God, and He healed the breach and restored them to His community of grace.



Our mission as followers of Jesus is to love God and love people. Our stated United Methodist mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We do that through our commitment to welcome everyone of all race, color, religion, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, and age and our dedication to nurturing everyone and helping them grow in their faith journey with Christ.



What's next? Next is that we live into the faith that we claim we have. Christ is our salvation. Do we accept his grace? If this is our claim, then it is our work to nurture others as their journey begins. Friends, we go out to seek the signs of God's presence in this world. We go out marveling that we are signs of God's presence. Thanks be to God.