

Straight from the "Heart"

Worship Service from August 15, 2021



So far, we have heard that the compass points of a Christian are to reach up toward God, and out to each other by godly example. Today we continue moving outward in love for others because God has lovingly drawn close to us..."

Music (vv 1,3) Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

We proclaim that God's love saturates us in all we do...

Music The Gift of Love

Theme The song tells us the importance of the heart felt motivation for what we do in the name of love. Today's theme stories motivate us to love by giving us a *potential* practical reward for acting with compassion toward others... As you may have heard these more popular stories, I'll give the Reader's Digest versions. The first, called *Grandmother's Table*, comes from the Brothers Grimm. (And the story lives up to the brothers' name too 😊)

Once upon a time there was a feeble old woman whose husband died and so she went to live with her son and his wife and their little daughter. Each day the old woman's sight dimmed and her hearing grew worse, and her hands trembled, which made eating peas or soup an adventure. The son and wife began to get annoyed the way she spilled her meal all over the table, and one day, after knocking over a glass of milk, they felt enough was enough. So, they set up a small table for her in the corner next to the broom closet. She sat there all alone with tear filled eyes looking across the room at the others. Sometimes they spoke to her while they ate, but usually it was to scold her for dropping a bowl or a fork.

One evening just before dinner, the little girl was playing on the floor with her building blocks and her father asked what she was making. She smiled, "I'm building a little table for you and mother so you can eat by yourselves in the corner when I get big."

Her parents stared at her for some time and began to cry as it all began to sink in. That night they led the old woman back to her place at the big table, and from then on, her son and wife didn't seem to mind a bit when she spilled something every now and then.

Aesop offers us *The Lion and the Mouse*, which tells us kindness in not a weakness and is capable to be done by both the mighty and the meek.

A little mouse darted across the paw of the great sleeping lion, awakening him. The lion snatched him up and was about to eat him when the mouse pleaded, "Oh, please, let me go. And some day I may help you."

The lion laughed at the thought of needing his help, but he had a good nature and set the mouse free. Not too long after, the lion got caught in a net. He tugged and pulled with all his might, but the ropes were too strong. He roared loudly. The little mouse heard and ran to the spot. "Be still, dear Lion, and I will set you free." and with his sharp little teeth, he cut through the ropes and the lion came out of the net. Then the mouse said, "You laughed at me once. You thought I was too little to do you any good, but now you see -- you owe your life to a poor little mouse."

I'm not so sure I like the "I told you so" at the end, but Aesop wanted to make sure the listener of the story got the point...

And finally, we have an ancient tale which is similar to Aesop's. It is called *Androcles and the Lion*; which tells us that our own hardships should not prevent us from feeling for and acting on behalf of others who are hurting.

Androcles was a poor slave who had run away from a cruel, unkind master in Rome. He hid himself in the woods for many days, but there was no food to be found and he grew weak and sick. He crawled into a cave to lay down and he fell fast asleep. But he was awakened a short time later by a roaring lion that had entered the cave. Androcles feared the lion would kill him, but soon discovered the lion was not angry but in pain, limping on a tender foot. The slave grew so bold that he took hold of the lame paw and saw a long, sharp thorn. The lion stood quite still and rubbed his head against the man's shoulder as if to say, "I know you can help me." With one quick strong pull he removed the thorn. The lion was full of joy. The lion leaped about, and licked the hands and feet of his new friend.

Androcles was no longer afraid, and the two laid down, side by side to sleep. For a long time, the lion brought food for Androcles to eat, and the two became such good friends that they both found this new life a very happy one.

But then one day Roman soldiers were passing through the woods and found Androcles in the cave. They recognized him as a runaway slave and took him back to Rome. Now in those days, runaway slaves were made to fight angry, hungry lions for the entertainment of the citizens. When the day came, thousands of people crowded to see this -- "sport." A door to the arena floor opened and

Androcles was brought in. He was faint with fear because the roar of the hungry lions could already be heard. He looked at the crowd and saw no pity in any of their faces.

Another arena door opened, and the starving lion rushed out. Androcles gave a yell, not of terror but of joy, for the lion was his old friend from the woods. The people were expecting to see the man killed by the lion we amazed as they saw the slave put his arms around the lion's neck, and the lion in turn laid down and licked his feet and lovingly rubbed his head against the man's face as though he wanted to be petted. They could not understand, so Androcles stood to tell them all about it, and with his arm around the lion's neck, he told their story. He concluded, "I am a man, but no man has ever befriended me. Only this poor lion has been kind to me, and we love each other as brothers."

The people were not so bad that they would continue in their cruelty. They cried for the slave and the lion both to, "Live and be free!" They were set free and they lived together in Rome for many years.

The three stories teach us two lessons, maybe three -- well perhaps a lot of them, but I am just going to point out a couple. From the perspective of one character in each of the stories -- when we receive kindness, we give kindness; just as God was kind to us, we are kind to him by being kind to others. Point 2: If we are kind to others, people will be kind to us. Ehh, general rule, not specific -- doesn't happen every time -- I'll talk about that in a second. The first and third story add an additional nuance, when we are not kind or kind to each other, others notice, and they may become not kind or kind as well....

Of course, as I said, these are general rules, absolutes. There are times we can be kind, and we still will not receive kindness back. We have a hymn that talks about how Jesus hands were kind hands, and yet look how he got treated by some others even though Jesus was kind. But it did not deter Jesus from continuing to be compassionate toward us, and it should not deter us from being compassionate toward others, for this is why we were created...

Responsive Reading (LR - Lay Reader, **P/C Pastor with Congregation**)

LR: God is rich in compassion and mercy. He loved us so much that even though we were spiritually dead and doomed by our sins, he gave us back our lives again when he raised Christ from the dead.

P/C: **He united us into the very life of Christ and saved us by his wonderful grace!**

LR: He raised us up with Christ ... in order that we will be the visible display -- the examples -- of God's infinite riches of grace and kindness -- that he showers on us through Jesus. For it is by grace that we are saved -- through trusting Christ -- and even trusting is not of ourselves, it too is a gift from God.

P/C: There is nothing we could ever do to earn this salvation.

LR: For it is the love gift of God that brought us to Christ, and it is God himself who has given us new life in Christ and made us what we are.

P/C: We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good deeds.

LR: We have become his re-created people that will fulfill our destiny for a life of good actions that he has prepared each of us to do.

P/C: He planned that we should spend our lives doing good works by helping others. (From Ephesians 2:4-10 (TPT, TLB, NIV, et. al.))

Re-created by grace to do good for God and others, but the works do not necessarily guarantee the desired results -- those results, like our salvation, is always in the hands of God. So we trust him and ask him to bless the work he has put in our hearts to do. "We'll sing our prayer chorus once to get familiar with it, and then again to prepare our hearts for prayer..."

Prayer Music Bless Thou the Gifts (2 x) (to tune of Jesus Shall Reign)

Bless thou the gifts our hands have brought;
bless thou the work our hearts have planned.
Ours is the faith, the will, the thought;
the rest, O God, is in thy hand.

Pastoral Eternal Lord, we trust that you are guiding us to do what we want, so we trust that as we plan and do them that you will bless those actions and accomplish what you want through them, be it in us or in others. For we know that as we rely on you, our faith will not be shaken, for you always surrounding your people with your protective love. Goodness rules in your land, so we resist temptations. Be good to us as we strive in our hearts to do right. Bring wholeness to us, our community, and beyond. We rejoice and praise you, and we will for our entire lives. We will not prioritize our faith in human leadership because they cannot save. Their plans fail the moment they leave. But we do put our hope in you for you created everything and you remain faithful forever. You uphold the cause of the oppressed and give food to the hungry, you set free those imprisoned by evil, you give us insight and lift up those who are humbled. You love and watch over those who do

right and are in right relationship with you. We praise you Lord for you reign forever and you sustain us in our need (Portions inspired by Ps 125, 146).

Intercession This is why we continue to lift up * Jennifer DeHanke who had surgery, * for Bill Wycoff who is home recovering, * for Vivian Lemon's son Denny and Gar, Vivian gives her thanks to God and for your prayers - both are recovering well. * for the Malott's nephew * Arbie Gibson, * Jack Kelley and * Nancy Kelley, and today we add the Family and friends of Mike Sharlow's mother Helen who passed away, and for pastor's friends Ernie and Catherine Rice, whose daughter Carrie passed away.

Now, gracious and holy God, as we open the word, give us diligence to seek you and a heart to love you, that we may follow your directions through the power of the spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray **Lord's Prayer**

Bible Reading Intro and Reading Acts 4:32-35, 6:1-5a

We started this series a few weeks ago by looking at Acts 2 where the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings, and they united together for meals, for communion, for prayer, and to share resources. They did all of this humbly, generously, and joyfully, and the Lord added more and more people "who were being saved and coming to life".

Well, every growing ministry has growing *pains*, and pains invite potential problems, or as The Living Bible puts it, "there were rumblings of discontent" (Acts 6:1).

All the believers were one in mind and heart. Selfishness was not a part of their community, for they shared everything they had with one another. The apostles gave powerful testimonies about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great measures of grace rested upon them all. Some who owned houses or land sold them and brought the proceeds before the apostles to distribute to those without. Not a single person among them was needy.

During those days the number of Jesus' followers kept multiplying greatly. But a complaint was brought against those who spoke Aramaic by the Greek-speaking Jews, who felt their widows were being overlooked during the daily distribution of food. The twelve apostles called a meeting of all the believers and told them, "It is not advantageous for us to be pulled away from the word of God to wait on tables. We want you to carefully select from among yourselves seven godly men. Make sure they are honorable, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and we will give them the responsibility of this

crucial ministry of serving. That will enable us to give our full attention to prayer and preaching the word of God.” Everyone in the church loved this idea. (TPT)

If we are going to bless others through our service, as we sang earlier, we need God to first bless us

Music Lord, We Come to Ask Your Blessing

Lord, we come to ask your blessing on the love that makes us one;
here, as Christians, to acknowledge you are Lord, and you alone.

God of love, unless you bless us how can we each other bless?
Only as you live within us is there depth of happiness.

May our loving be a sharing of the gifts we each possess;
may no failure of forbearance turn our love to bitterness.

Lord, we come to ask your blessing in the presence of our friends:
Grant us joy that blesses others, grant us love that never ends.

Sermon Outward: In Acts of Mercy and Works for Justice

In this series so far, we have learned that as we devote ourselves to God’s teaching, we discover compass points-- directions for living out the life of faith. The first was moving upward to God as he is already moving toward us; the second is outward, last week we moved outward by the example of godly living. This week, we are still moving outward. But before we get into that, let’s lay some groundwork...

Most faiths of the world do not separate the spiritual quest from physical, emotional, mental, relational, or any other part

Faith is tangible

of life, it is all one holistic bundle. Our spiritual life is meant to be lived and expressed in practical, tangible ways.

In about 5 weeks, for example, Jews will celebrate Sukkot (sue-coat) or the festival of tabernacles, or booths. A part of what those who participate in that celebration will do is that they will build a shack, a hut, a tent – something that is outside their actual house, and it is not weatherproof, and they will put it out in a yard or a field someplace. It is not weatherproof because they need to be able to see through it to see the stars, the sky, and nature around them as they live in that place. It is to help them relive what happened to their people when they moved from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness and toward the promised land and to remind them that their true shelter in life was not their nice physical home that they

lived in, or even this temporary shack that they had built, but God himself was their true shelter. And through the holy days, as they relive the ancient stories, it becomes a story -- not of their ancestors, their heritage, or of their God long ago, but it becomes their story and their God who is still with them and moving along with them into their future just as he has always done; and the faith becomes life-giving and relevant, and reinforces how they are meant to live daily as God's people -- (practical application).

The prophet Micah gets to the heart of what it means to be God's people in short concise statements which some have called the Hebrew Beatitudes. Like the New Testament Beatitudes, it is easy to admire these poetic pronouncements as they roll off the tongue so beautifully. It is not as easy to apply their depth of meaning and put them into practice. Paul draws almost parallel thinking when he wrote what we heard in the responsive reading.

Micah reminds God's people of their story -- how, despite their consistent disobedience, (even as they were delivered from Egypt and traveling through the wilderness to the promised land) the Lord never turned his back on them, but faithfully saved them again and again and again. (See Micah 6:3-5)

And Paul says in the New Testament. After going on and on about how we were dead in sins, and living as sinners, and controlled by serving the evil nature and not obeying God... God still loves us! deeply -- and saved us by his wonderful grace. (See Ephesians 2:4-5, 8a)

The people of Micah's day reply to their reminder of God's provision: What can we do? ... What will make up for everything we've done wrong? And they make some suggestions, but the list (See Micah 6:6-7) clearly demonstrates that they knew there was nothing they could pay God back or earn their way to that salvation. And what they ask in rhetorical questions, Paul states clearly,

Nothing we did could ever earn [or pay back for] this gracious gift of salvation. No one will ever be able to boast, for salvation is never a reward for good works or human striving. (Ephesians 2:8b-9)

But that doesn't drop the topic. It isn't like "well I can't pay you back, so (shrugging) --- I'll just go on with my life of sinning and not worry about it." That's not how it works. Paul gives the needed answer of how to respond, that while we cannot earn or repay God for this free salvation, there is an expected tangible, grateful response -- He re-created us so that we will fulfill God's planned out destiny for us -- to do good works demonstrating to all how good God is. And he

had that plan from the beginning. (See Ephesians 2:10) We go back to what we were originally designed to be.

For as Micah puts it in his “beatitudes”: While we cannot earn or repay God for his repeated faithful deliverance, Micah now gives them the expected tangible, grateful response -- “You must act with justice. You must love to show mercy. And you must be humble as you live in the sight of your God”. (Micah 6:8 (NIRV))

That last sentence has been covered in the previous weeks of this series. Devotion to the teaching leads to a movement toward a relationship with God, and out of that relationship should naturally result in a godly example. But we also now move outward in acts of mercy and works for justice. Our response to God is primarily demonstrated in how we treat others. Our faith goes beyond a muttering the right words or thinking the proper beliefs.

One primary difference that Christ makes in our lives (if we allow him to make it) is an ever-growing heartfelt compassion for others. Biblical compassion, by definition, is feeling something so strongly (with such “passion”) within our being that we can’t help but take action, to do something about what we are seeing. It may be that the action leads to the feeling rather than the feeling to the action. It depends upon how you are wired and how God works with you in your heart. Some people act, and then they start feeling, other people feel, and then they start acting. Generally they build on each other, it is like a circle, they chase each other, it doesn’t matter where you hop into the circle, whether you act first or feel first. But the important thing is that we care, and we care in action because we feel for others, in response to God who has done more for us that we can ever repay. James talks about faith in action when he says,

Acts of Mercy

Suppose a person claims to have faith but doesn’t act on their faith... Suppose a brother or a sister has no clothes or food. Suppose one of you says to them, “Go. I hope everything turns out fine for you. Keep warm. Eat well.” And suppose you do nothing about what they really need. Then what good have you done? It is the same with faith. If it doesn’t cause us to do something, [the faith isn’t a living faith]. (James 2:14-17 (NIRV))

One of the biggest hindrances to practical demonstrations of mercy is an impractical possession that our stuff has over us. Have you heard the saying, “Do you own your possessions, or do your possessions own you?” It is a question that is formed in response to those who measure a full life on the basis how much stuff

we have -- as is depicted in the old bumper sticker -- The one who [ends up] with the most toys wins.

It is often our love of stuff that keeps us from offering ourselves to others when we should. You heard in the Bible reading what the early Christians did. And I am not suggesting we do what they did or how they did it -- that was their culture and their way, and we have our culture and our way -- but we still have to have that attitude, that principle -- that everything is God's and we have to do what God wants us to do with what we have. The early Christians clearly demonstrated that they were not owned by their possessions. Their stuff was just stuff. God was their true shelter -- and so they used their stuff as resources to help others who were in true need.

Some might say, "But I don't have any stuff to start with, then what?" Compassion comes in many forms -- not all of them are giving of costly tangible resources...

Remember Peter at the Temple in Acts 3? The beggar was asking for help. They fixed their faces on each other, and the beggar was expecting to get money, and Peter said, "I don't have any money, ... but what I do have, I give to you, and he took his hand and raised him up and he was healed. (See Acts 3:1-10)

And we may not have what Peter had either, but we all have some gifting of God, and we can all give time, and energy, we have a listening ear to someone who needs talk, a prayer with someone who is hurting, a no-cost or low-cost diversion for someone who is stressed. A random kind deed for someone who needs a happy surprise -- and who doesn't need that once in a while? These too are tangible and valuable and critically needed.

We may be able to give loving aid to people. But if the reason they need loving aid is because society hinders and **Works for Justice** sets up roadblocks so that they cannot return to or achieve a full life in the first place, then, if it is within our power, we need to work at changing the system, changing the situation -- so that all can receive that fair opportunity, especially to receive forgiveness (when needed) and receive transformation, and that they can find opportunities to be unconditionally accepted and loved -- as God loved us in Christ.

We can't fix every flawed system. We can't be everything for everyone. But just like with acts of mercy, we are called to consider our gifts and talents and resources and reach out in word and deed to the best of our God-given and God-empowered abilities and make what difference we can as God leads us.

A television detective struggled with his personal and professional life. His personal life would drag down his professional life and his professional life would drag down his personal life. Any of you been there? I'll take it from the chuckles that you have. It was a vicious circle for him. In one episode, he was sent to South Africa for a conference in which he was called on to give a speech on how police make a difference. While he was there, before it was time for his speech, a crime takes place that involved people from his home country and so he is asked to help with the investigation. In his eagerness for justice, he ends up helping more than they wanted him to help, which led to several conflicts. Nevertheless, the case is solved and as the story ends, he stands up in front of a small group of police officers from around the world and says, "Do we make a difference? (Pause) Maybe? (Pause) Sometimes. (Pause) Not much. (Pause) What I do know is that we should never stop trying. (Pause) And we need to remember that every little counts..." (*Wallander* "The White Lioness" Season 4 ep. 1)

It probably doesn't get as much attention as it should, but every year in early September, Major League Baseball observes Roberto Clemente Day. Do any of you remember him? He was a 15-time all-star player for the Pittsburgh Pirates, who died in an airplane crash delivering supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua New Year's Eve 1972. Each year, each team presents a nomination from their team for a humanitarian award in Clemente's name, for the player who demonstrates sportsmanship, community involvement and positive contributions, both on and off the field. Clemente is quoted as saying, "any time you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don't, you are wasting your time on earth."

I think most of us want to see God's justice and mercy forever roll down like waters as Amos told us (See Amos 5:24). And we crave for God to use us to help make that positive difference happen in at least the people around us.

Some of you may remember that back in the '90s that it became popular to wear bracelets with the letters **WWJD** on them. Do you remember those? "What Would Jesus Do?" The intent of the bracelet was to remind us that in any given situation we would think about what Jesus would do in that same situation and then that is what would do too. Over time, some people argued that the bracelet only succeeded in having us think about what Jesus would do but didn't quite encourage us to begin to do it. It would be like admiring the paintings of a great artist or listening to a gifted musician play. But looking and listening -- even studying and knowing -- is not the same as picking up a brush or playing a note. If

we want to become an artist or musician, or a Christ follower, knowing what they know is only a first (and never ending) step. It also takes a daily doing of disciplined actions that will make us artists, make us musicians, or make us Christian disciples.

Perhaps a better acronym would have been: **WWJHMD-DI**. "What Would Jesus Have Me Do-Do It." More than knowing what Jesus would do is to know what he wants us do, and to do it. Micah and Paul and the early Christians saw a grace-filled compassionate beauty in disciplining their lives according to the purposes of God as they saw in the actions of Christ. (Well, not Micah, but for the Christians) They had discovered that doing God's will kept them from stumbling in this perilous walk through life, along which he continues to provide us with his salvation, his wholeness, and a meaningful fulfillment of our quest, or as Paul put it in our reading today: our destiny... being fulfilled. Let's pray.

Prayer Holy God, we live such cluttered lives. Society floods us with messages that we need - and we deserve - and we must find our status -- going by this route or that route -- and too often, it is just "stuff". Yet doing justice, offering merciful kindness, and walking humbly doesn't necessarily require us to own anything.

Forgive us from going down those diverse paths, and help us to turn from the directions of *destructive* patterns of accumulation -- and seek you as our first direction, as our shelter, as our oasis, as our kingdom, and as our right relationship -- which is then expressed in how we treat each other. Remind us that in your will there is understanding, that in you there is healing, and while we may not do like others do, because our gifts are different, we can find ways of humbly bringing justice, and mercy and the love of Jesus to those around us, and it is in Jesus name that we ask that you accomplish this in our hearts. Amen.

The Spirit leads us to places where we can bring light and hope and joy.

Music

The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve

The Spirit sends us forth to serve; we go in Jesus' name
to bring glad tidings to the poor, God's favor to proclaim.

We go to comfort those who mourn and set the burdened free;
where hope is dim, to share a dream and help the blind to see.

We go to be the hands of Christ, to scatter joy like seed
and, all our days, to cherish life, to do the loving deed.

Then let us go to serve in peace, the gospel to proclaim,
God's Spirit has empowered us; we go in Jesus' name.

Blessing Now continue to move “true north”, to Jesus who serves and sends us to serve that we may receive and share his mercy filled justice and as you continue to move in his direction, receive and demonstrate the full life.

CCLI # 2561297

Lord, We Come to Ask Your Blessing Words: Fred Pratt Green Music: W. Daniel Landes

The Spirit Sends us Forth to Serve Words: Delores Dufner Music: USA Folk Melody