



Series Intro:

JUST LOVE is a five-week sermon series based on the 2021 summer theme from Camp Wapo, Ox Lake and Wilderness Canoe Base. We hope this resource will help connect your congregation with LWLBC, lighten the load for you as a preacher, and help your congregation grow in faith in these challenging times. This resource can be used during the summer months to connect your congregation to what your students are learning at camp - or it can be used any time of the year.

Inspired by the summer's theme verse from Psalm 33.5, "The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of God's unfailing love," this worship series is premised on God's unapologetically biased and comprehensively world-embracing love. Our confession is this: God loves the whole creation AND God desires the healthy and abundant flourishing and fruiting joy of the creation that happen whenever justice and righteousness are powerfully present and practiced among the peoples and nations of the world.

This message of grace and its call to life, animated and advanced by the narrative of the Hebrew Bible and embodied in the ministry and message, as well as the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that is announced and amplified in the New Testament, frees and empowers us to organize our shared lives along the lines of generosity and justice. Each of the daily (at camp) and weekly (in the sermon series) themes is an opportunity to explore a distinct facet of what it means to respond to the simple imperative invitation that guides our summer's reflection: "Just love"

Each of the five weeks has a story that is suggested for the preaching text - that will be the same text that campers will engage as part of the Bible study curriculum. We've also included companion texts for congregations whose practice involves multiple readings and/or a gospel reading.

JUST LOVE

PSALM 33:5

Liturgical Resources for the Series

Offertory Prayer

God of perfect summer nights and moonbeams on lakes, we are grateful for this world and all of its bounty. Along with all of creation, we give thanks to you for providing all that we need for this life. Receive the gifts we bring; gifts of money, gifts of time, and gifts of compassion. Use them to restore justice and spread love throughout the world. Amen.

Confession & Forgiveness

L: We enter into worship with humble hearts, confessing before God that we are broken and in need of God's mercy and grace.

**All: God of justice and righteousness,
We admit that we can never live up to, never fully live into,
And barely comprehend the kind of love that you have for all of creation.
As hard as we try, we fall short of loving our neighbor as ourselves.
As much as we talk about longing for justice,
our whole lives are wrapped up in systems of injustice,
And we struggle to untangle ourselves.**

**Restore us, O God, along with your whole creation.
Where we have become numb to this unjust world,
Awaken our senses, that we might be partners with you
In creating a more just and loving world for all people.**

Leader: The earth is filled with God's unfailing love. You are restored, forgiven and made new through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Live in this promise, knowing that love and justice are all around you, and are yours to give and receive.

All: Amen.

Blessing

This blessing is a hybrid combination of Meta Herrick Carlson's "For Sending a Child into the World" from *Ordinary Blessings* and Sarah CR Clark's original words. Adapted with permission.

The world has waited long enough
to hear your voice,
to feel your feet treading with gentle curiosity,
to see how you embrace each adventure.

God's world needs you
and thank God that
the Spirit will whisper direction
directly into your heart
to the places in need of
and the people who are thirsty for
love and justice.

Go, child of God,
into the wild places
where you will fly and fall and finally
build brighter days
singing all the while
of a holy JUST LOVE

Week One

Theme: *Just Love*

Texts: *John 13:34-35*

Psalm 33:1-22

Hymn and Song Suggestions

“For the One” - by Brian & Jenn Johnson

“Great Are You Lord” - by Leslie Jordan

“Reckless Love” - by Cory Asbury

ELW #631 - Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling

ELW #712 - Lord Whose Love in Humble Service

ELW #709 - Jesu, Jesu

Prayer of the Day: God of justice and love, the last time you ate with your best friends, you invited them to love one another in the model of your love. We long for your love to pour out of our lives and into the world. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, so that we can love one another, not just when we feel like it, but even when love feels messy and hard. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

John 13:34-35

John’s gospel is built for comfort not for speed. If the gospel of Mark is a breathless all-in-one account that bursts into the room with an interruptive and immediate word about Jesus, John’s is a more patient, stage-by-stage telling of a longer story that begins at the beginning. When reading and preaching from John, remember to slow down, and work on paying attention.

But it’s not all about pace. Recall, I mentioned comfort. John’s audience was a mixed-bag family of folks from different backgrounds and cultures trying to be faithful to Christ in a time when the emerging movement of Jesus people was being threatened and abused and ridiculed and rocked from many sides. Anti-Christian attitudes among many of the Jewish faithful, who were regrouping and recovering after the trauma of Jerusalem’s fall in 70 AD, split families and communities already reeling from the loss of the temple. Many of the Jewish Christians in John’s audience were grieving their expulsion from synagogues and social circles that had once offered the guidance and guardrails of their identity.

Samaritans and Greek-speaking others among John’s family of faith were often ostracized and alienated from the customs and cultures of their upbringing, too. Whether directed by logical officials or erupting organically among hostile neighbors, anti-Christian violence and economic ostracization were part of the daily lives of the faithful, whom Greco-Roman culture viewed with suspicion and scorn, calling them “anti-social” and “atheist.” In John’s gospel, the words of Jesus arrive as a balm for the suffering souls and bruised bodies of people who have been attacked and wounded for following such a savior.

So that seemingly interminable monologue that Jesus utters over the supper in that upper room in John is less a droning sermon making theological hay and more an ongoing song of comfort and hope and assurance. Help your hearers listen for the heartbeat of Jesus’ message: I am with you. I will always be with you. Help them hear the invitation as well: come with me; follow. We will love the world together; I have shown you how to do it, now practice with your family of faith.

Some scholars read Jesus' command to love one another as a call for peace among competing factions of the new church, with its decentralized communities all around the mediterranean--something like a letter to an embattled church council: chill out; we're all friends here. And there may be some of that at work in this passage; John is not above trying to persuade with the story he's telling. But it's important, also, to remember Jesus' motive and message, which cuts through our impulse to avoid doing the wrong thing: do not be distressed about the specifics of how you are identified as my disciple; it's not about a badge or a hat or a diet or a pedigree or a position in the church, it's about *love*. As I have loved you, so you love each other. Whenever you love one another, you are bearing witness to me and my love.

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus' words invite us to action: Just *Love*. As Jesus has loved us, so we love one another. Unpack the love Jesus has shown, throughout the gospel witness of John and throughout your life! As Jesus has comforted us, so we comfort one another. As Jesus has forgiven us so we forgive one another. As Jesus has fed us, so we feed one another. As Jesus has healed us, so we heal one another. As Jesus has refused to abandon us to our impulses for revenge or status or hate or bitterness, so we refuse to abandon one another to these things. As Jesus has welcomed and uplifted us so we welcome and uplift one another. As Jesus has stepped beyond the boundaries we set up about whose life is worthy of care and respect and joy and whose is not, so we step beyond them, too. As Jesus has placed himself between hostile forces and the hurting world, so we, together with the community he has called into being, step into this space with the same strength of purpose even if it threatens our safety or disturbs our peace.

Jesus has shown the disciples, and the world, a new and radical kind of love. The foot-washing, leper-cleansing, lawbreaking, poor-loving, dignity-respecting Jesus has shown us, by excluding no one, that, in God's dream for the beloved creation, love and justice are inextricably woven together. You can't have love without justice, and you can't have justice without love. Jesus includes everyone – especially those who have been ostracized, left out, maligned, feared, and "othered" by the dominant and domineering forces of his time.

In John's telling, Jesus is the way God has chosen to be known to the world. Jesus is the new and redeeming "word" God speaks into the world--a word, in this Gospel, that opens eyes and ears and doors and even tombs. In this passage Jesus reveals that we, each of us listening--each of us who have this word ringing in us--are the way that Jesus will become known in the world. And the central attitude and action of that way is just... love.

Psalm 33: 1-22

Psalm 33 is a praise psalm, giving thanks to God for being great and for creating a good world. Anywhere you notice traditional Hebrew parallelism- where the words or ideas in one line relate to the line either before after it- pay special attention because, right there, the Hebrew poet is trying to emphasize something important.

This brief and hope-filled Psalm invites hearers to join in song and music-making to celebrate God's strength and God's work--as creator and deliverer and judge over all the earth. The psalmist's song of power and joy is an invitation to share in and show the righteousness of God--expressed in God's good and powerful works of creation as well as God's unfailing, steadfast love for God's people. The word that English versions of this text translate as "steadfast love" (see verses 5, 18, and 22) is the single Hebrew term *hesed*, which, in the 240+ times it appears in the Hebrew Bible, describes not simply a sense of goodwill or favor, but an intimate, deep, enduring,

covenant-related and *practical* love-commitment. *Hesed* is one of the Hebrew Bible's preferred ways of describing God's relationship with people. In this Psalm--notably in the single verse we chose as the theme verse for our Summer's theme--that relationship extends to fill the entire earth; nothing and no-one are excluded.

Along with *hesed*, another major theme in this Psalm is *righteousness*, which the Hebrew Bible describes as what the world, and human life in creation, looks like when things go according to God's intention. Righteousness and justice are frequently paired in this part of the Bible. Righteousness happens when things go right. People can be righteous as they participate and contribute to this working out of rightness in their relationships with human and nonhuman neighbors. Injustice is the result of *unrighteousness*, of things going wrong. The psalmist is calling out those who would identify as righteous to join in the praise of the God whose word of instruction and grace makes human righteousness possible.

Week Two

Theme: *Right What's Wrong*

Texts: *Luke 10:25-37*

Deuteronomy 10:17-22

Hymn and Song Suggestions

"All the Poor and Powerless" - by Leslie Jordan

"Live Christ" - by Celia Whitler

"Build My Life" - by Pat Barrett

ELW #530 - Here, O Lord, Your Servants Gather

ELW #721 - Goodness Is Stronger than Evil

ELW #679 - For the Fruit of All Creation

Prayer of the Day: God of justice and love, as the Samaritan helped another traveler on life's journey, open us up to the lives of people whose culture and experience differ from our own. Help us to remove the boundaries and borders that keep us from one another, and build relationships that lead toward a more just world. Show us the way so that we can begin to right what's wrong and make space in our lives to hold love for all people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Luke 10:25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a well known story. Jesus tells it to a lawyer who wants to make sure he's following the law perfectly. The lawyer pretty much says in this see-how-smart-I-am-because-I'm-asking-this-hard-question-kind-of-voice, "Jesus, you told me that I'm supposed to completely love God and that I'm also supposed to love my neighbors as much as I love myself. BUT, who **exactly** is my neighbor?" Jesus's answer is the story of the Good Samaritan.

This story continues to explore themes about love and righteousness and justice we noted in last week's texts. The lawyer's question about loving God and neighbor are rooted in the Hebrew Bible's understanding of these things. In the story that comprises his response, Jesus discloses what the deep, wide, active, and steadfast love of God celebrated in Psalm 33 looks like "in real life." The parable of the Good Samaritan shows that the love of neighbor, commanded by a God who loves justice, looks like making things right, like transcending societal

boundaries to help a suffering human being, like spending one's own wealth to provide for a stranger, like making and keeping promises.

Luke's gospel describes Jesus as an example and agent of God's righteousness. Where Jesus' words and actions land, people and things are made right--healed, restored, redeemed, forgiven, honored, accepted, adopted. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises, and his ministry demonstrates the arrival of God's reign. Parables like this one--about the despised foreigner showing mercy and love when members of the suffering man's own family of faith would not--illustrate that God's kingdom is a reality in which the lines we humans draw to separate ourselves from one another are being wiped away. Luke's special emphasis on the poor, his inclusive honoring of the women among Jesus' followers, and the mixed Jewish and gentile audience to which he was writing all underscore this world-changing message.

Bible scholar (and friend) Matt Skinner describes the unique place Luke's gospel gives to "outsiders" like the Samaritan in this parable:

"Of the four Gospels, Luke gives the most attention to Jesus' significance for people who were not part of dominant society. Some of these people on the margins of Jesus' culture include those afflicted with diseases, the handicapped, aliens, refugees, children, women, the poor, slaves, prostitutes, widows, the elderly, shepherds, tax collectors, Samaritans, and Gentiles. These kinds of people figure positively in the Gospel and benefit from Jesus' ministry."

Among other things, Luke's Gospel and this parable have the effect of rearranging our ideas about who has value, and who we--as those who would *love* to follow Jesus' after he answers a few of our lawyer-like questions about exactly what we need to do to be right with God--ought to be seeing, serving, and loving as our neighbors.

Deuteronomy 10:17-22

The book of Deuteronomy includes an extended (meaning hella long) speech/sermon by Moses as he and the people are standing on the plateau east of the Jordan River, with the promised land spread out before them. Theologian and cartoonist Daniel Erlander has called this Moses' "commencement speech." The people are graduating from their 40 years of lesson-filled desert wandering (what Dan calls "The Wilderness School") and are about to venture into the next chapter of their life, which will include land and property and all kinds of neighbors. Moses, who doesn't get to go with them into this new chapter, is reminding them of all they've learned in their years of living so closely with Yahweh, who freed them from slavery in Egypt and chose them to be a special people, bound by a covenant and now given the great gift of a homeland. This is when the blessings that they have received from God can begin to become blessings for the rest of the world through the witness of the life they will build.

In this snippet of that much longer speech, Moses is reminding the gathered and very-likely-impatient new graduates about the character of the God to whom they are bound. Yahweh is powerful and mighty and great and terrible (a common way most gods were described at the time) and also just and fair and--get this--*concerned for the welfare of those who were not part of the chosen nation*. God cares, we are told, for the widow and the orphan (people without the supportive structures of family and clan) and for the sojourner, or foreigner. God's care is not simply a general positive feeling either, the text includes the execution of justice for the "fatherless" vulnerable, and the tangible goods of food and clothing for those in need. Remember, preaches Moses, this is the same God who heard us crying out in our misery beneath the unjust abuses of Pharaoh and carried us to freedom. And now, we who began as a single family of seventy, are as many as the stars of heaven.

In Deuteronomy, Moses wants the people to be sustained and shaped by their gratitude for God's redemption. He wants them to live with the gratitude and generosity of those who have been given everything as a gift. At the same time he's warning them (and us) that if we start acting like Pharaoh, exploiting the poor and enslaving the stranger, we should expect the great and terrible God of gods and Lord of lords to come against us in power, until righteousness is restored and justice served.

Week Three

Theme: *Make Justice Roll*

Texts: *Amos 5:6-24*

Luke 7:36-50

Hymn & Song Suggestions:

"Kyrie Eleison" by Chris Tomlin & Matt Maher

"Build Your Kingdom Here" - by Rend Collective

"Instruments of Your Peace" - by Kelly-Marie Murphy

ELW #583 Take My Life That I May Be

ELW #717 Let Justice Flow Like Streams

ELW #710 - Let Streams of Living Justice Flow

Prayer of the Day: God of Justice and Love - So often in this world, we experience justice as the trickle of a tiny stream, when your justice, as the prophet Amos reminds us, is like a mighty, rolling river. Strengthen your church and its people that we might work tirelessly for justice until it becomes a river that changes the landscape of this world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Amos 5:6-24

The first half of our summer theme verse from Psalm 33 is a wonderful proclamation of what God loves: righteousness and justice. Today, as we crouch on down beside the prophet Amos, we will look at the flip side of that proclamation: what God *doesn't* love. What makes God sick and sad and mad. What God *hates*. Spoiler alert: it's injustice and unrighteousness.

This can be tender territory, by the way. The threat of God's non-love has been and continues to be used as a cruel club to bash all kinds of individual people and groups, from women to people of color and indigenous folk, to LGBTQ people. The list is long and lamentable.

One of the key distinctions it will be helpful to hold in your mind as you prepare to preach on Amos is the difference between *injustice*, which is a societal and systemic concern, and *impurity*, which is an accusation often thrown at people or groups of people to vilify, dehumanize, and make them feel unworthy of love. While the language of impurity does show up among the prophets, it usually has to do with the un-rightness of the society--the distance it has moved from God's desire for justice and equity. While occasionally they have harsh words for the rulers and the ruling class--those tasked with special responsibility for the care and stewardship of the community--the prophets aren't here to convict or condemn the humanity of some segment of society; they're showing up to make all of us squirm about the injustices in which every one of us participates.

But that's not all. Alongside the alarming indictments of present injustice, the prophets also call us to live authentically and courageously in service to God's vision and desire for a world where everyone gets what they

need to live and love and thrive. If there's a simple description for a world of justice, that's it: where everyone has what they need.

Here's an example that may help understand God's anger, as articulated by the prophets:

Imagine you're the parent (or aunt or uncle or babysitter) of an adorable toddler. You're taking a walk on the sidewalk. The kiddo in your care is ahead of you by 10 feet or so, bumbling along as usual, and she swerves towards the street at the same time as a truck is zooming past. Your heart leaps into your throat. You're yelling, screaming, waving your arms. You may be shouting angry words at the driver of the vehicle, the child, cars in general: *stop! Turn aside! Can't you see the baby!* You grab the child and yank her to safety. Tears. Trembling.

You're fierce and burning hot with fear and rage, and all this because of love.

There is shouting in Amos, and arm waving, and consequences speeding down the road towards the stumbling and wayward hearers. And there may indeed be squirming as you and your congregation witness this event of divine love. Being exposed to the God of the Universe's anger and fear and grief can be an unsettling thing. But if we want to get to know the real Yahweh (who loves justice and righteousness and whose love really does fill the earth in an ongoing and unfailing way), we will need to understand and deal with the bitter as well as the sweet.

The prophet Amos lived around 800 years before Jesus. At that time, the land we now call Israel and Palestine was split into two kingdoms, both ruled and inhabited by descendants of the people whom Moses and Miriam and Aaron led out of Egypt. The southern kingdom was called Judah. Its capital was Jerusalem. The northern Kingdom was called Israel. When Amos was on the scene, the king of Israel (Jeroboam II) made his home in the city of Samaria.

Amos was kind of a nobody when God called him to speak messages to the rulers of the land. He was a shepherd and he lived in a small village in northern Judah named Tekoa.

At that time, the kingdom of Israel appeared to be prosperous and happy. They were ruled by a pretty decent king. They had a strong military, so didn't have much trouble with their neighbors, they enjoyed fertile land and good weather. Israel had busy seaports and traded with other people of the Mediterranean. They also employed lots of priests and were able to build big shrines. The wealthy were comfortable, and many were wealthy. The people were also very religious, meaning they supported the public rituals and festivals and ceremonies. Many Israelites believed that their affluence and peace were gifts from God that they deserved because of their donations to the shrines and the fact that they said the right words of prayer at the right times.

Of course not everybody was happy, or prosperous, or felt good about the way things were. As in many societies that look prosperous, there were people whose unpaid labor, misfortune, and victimization kept them stuck in poverty and helped make the rich more wealthy than they needed to be. The poor in the land of Israel at that time suffered hunger and loss. Most people ignored that reality.

Amos showed up to remind everyone that a relationship with God isn't something money can buy, and that what matters most to God is how people and the land are cared for. Amos talked about how the rich despised and mistreated and cheated the poor, and how displays of piety and were meaningless when they were separated from honoring God by loving one's neighbor in real and tangible ways. Like most of the prophets in the Bible, Amos reminded his hearers that they were a people and a nation because of God's love--because God chose to liberate them from slavery in Egypt and then give them the great gift of a covenant of peace with God. This

covenant (written out in the Ten Commandments) showed the people how to live in ways that created a just society.

You can guess that a lot of people really got irritated by Amos. This happens pretty often to the prophets. Nobody who has power likes to be told that they're using it wrong, and this is exactly what Amos did (and what most prophets do). In addition to this critique of injustice, Amos also delivered the news that God was very angry about it, and that things would end badly if the society as a whole didn't change. This message of judgment got Amos kicked out of the kingdom's capital, but ignoring and exiling him didn't help. Within 40 or so years, the whole kingdom was defeated and destroyed by the Assyrian army and its people were dispersed all over the huge Assyrian empire.

This passage from Amos 5 consists of words Amos was given to speak. That "I" in the passage is God. Imagine that Amos is reading a very serious letter from God to a people who have lost their way. The prophet and God are trying to get the people to PAY ATTENTION.

Luke 7:36-50

This story, about a Pharisee and Jesus and an unnamed woman who arrives uninvited to interrupt their dinner with an act of extravagant devotion, offers a glimpse of the way Jesus undertook the role of prophet in his own time. It also illustrates a misconception about prophets that has persisted for millennia--that they're a kind of clairvoyant who can read minds or tell the future. And, like most of the stories Luke's gospel tells about Jesus, it also reveals a vision of how the economy of God's household works along lines that are different from what we assume and expect.

Jesus doesn't need to be a mind reader to know who he's dealing with. His brief parable about the link between the restorative gift of forgiveness and the life-changing power of love that flows in grace and gratitude illustrates who he is, who will be able to comprehend what his presence means for the world, and who will be blind to his purpose because of their comfortable positions in the status quo.

The Pharisee is comfortable in his role as host--comfortable enough to indulge the traveling holy man with a hearing and a meal. Like those of the same social status in Amos' day, this man believes his material comfort and social standing are evidence of his blessedness. The concrete concerns about justice and trust and relationship at the heart of God's covenant have for him blurred into an idea of piety and purity that can be settled with ritual actions and divisive definitions: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner."

Faced with an interruption at dinner, this Pharisee is hung up on his own understanding of holiness, which for him is inextricably linked with purity. Pharisee life was ordered around avoiding the stain of sin, and, in his imagination, sin is as contagious as COVID-19. The difference between personal purity and personal impurity is critical to the way he is able to see others--including both the uninvited woman and his invited guest, Jesus. Instead of an act of extravagant love, all he can see is a deeply shameful mess--a polluting presence that threatens everything it touches.

Jesus' parable prophetically pushes against the Pharisee's fear, and pokes at his piety--just as Amos' condemnation of the hypocrisy of Israelite worship hammered at the heart of what they thought they were doing right. In this man's mind, forgiveness is something to be avoided--except perhaps as a last resort. Accepting forgiveness necessarily involves understanding and admitting the need for it. Here, the wealthy and self-assured

Pharisee is revealed to be both impoverished and stingy, and the woman with the alabaster jar, whose sins “were many” is revealed to be living in the fearless, generous, and abundant new reality of God’s love.

For Jesus, the whole point is love. As a means to restore the rightness (righteousness) and mutuality of relationships in which no one has power over another, giving and receiving forgiveness are core elements of God’s kingdom--and, as exemplified by the woman’s response to Jesus--erupt in acts of great love and generosity and abundance--rolling down like water. In the story, these things also seem to lead to the blessings of faith and peace.

Week Four

Theme: *Let the Earth Spin*

Texts: *Genesis 2:1-4*

Exodus 22:8-10

Mark 2:23-28

Hymn & Song Suggestions

ELW #835 - All Creatures Worship God Most High!

ELW #824 - This Is My Father’s World

ELW #732 - Borning Cry

“Lord of My Life” - by Matt Maher

“Be Still” - by the Fray

“It is Well” - by Bethel Music & Kristene DiMarco

“Rest in You” - by All Sons and Daughters

Prayer of the Day: God of Justice and Love, you remind us over and over again that you are God and we are not. We toil and spin and try to put ourselves at the center of things. And yet, you are the one who spins the earth and gives us life and breath. As we worship, may we remember to rest in your love. As we leave this place, may we remember that our whole lives are a gift from you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Genesis 2:1-4 and Exodus 22:8-10

Genesis begins with the big picture: God is the creator of all things, including humans. God is the one who spins the earth, places it among the galaxies, and gives it as a gift for human beings to nurture and tend and enjoy. Genesis tells a story of order and sequence, describing the God-spoken evolution of everything, from chaotic fullness to the distinct and abundant diversity of cosmos and earth and life. Near the end of God’s week of creative work, humans are added to the mix (day six), and on day seven, God creates a blessed emptiness: the gift and example of rest. The rhythm of renewal and restoration is spun right into the order of creation. The Hebrew Bible is filled with instructions about this seventh day of the week (it would come to be called “Sabbath” from the Hebrew word for “rest”) that get more and more complicated over time. But in its purest form, Sabbath is made for humans to rest, enjoy, and give thanks for creation.

In Exodus, we find this break built into the covenant God makes for the people. By keeping these laws, they will shape themselves and their society into a reflection of God’s will for a world grounded in justice and mutual aid, and guided by gratitude, grace, and joy. Sabbath is given as a gift--commanded for everyone, including daughters and sons, servants and enslaved people, immigrants and refugees. Even animals were to be unmuzzled and given relief from work. In it’s comprehensive and egalitarian application, the Sabbath gift is another sign of the

universality of God's care for the whole creation; even those who cannot "afford" to take a day off get it. Every week. In Jewish communities today, each Sabbath is a small holiday; a moment to share a meal with neighbors and loved ones, to light candles in gratitude and remembrance, and to participate in God's alternate rhythm of creational life.

One of the coolest things about taking a weekly sabbath rest, as inaugurated in Genesis and then commanded in Exodus is that it gives us the opportunity to remember that it is God (and not us) who makes the world spin. We get to be part of God's movement of justice and love in the world, but that movement can and will go on without us; we can jump back in on the other side. Taking a sabbath is a statement of faith, and in a workaholic culture that tends towards idolatry when it comes to productivity and billable hours, it's a courageous act of righteous resistance. When we unhook ourselves from the impulses to control every outcome or to ensure we're seen as hardworking and worthwhile or to push forward whatever agenda we've set our hearts and souls behind, we are confessing the truth that the authors of Genesis were highlighting three thousand years ago: God really does have the whole world, including each of us, in God's hands.

Mark 2:23-28

Looking for ways in which to take Jesus' peg down a few holes, some Pharisees attempted to paint him as a Sabbath breaker. Their interpretation of the sabbath commandment began with the prohibition: no work was to be done. They saw Jesus' disciples eating grain from the field as they walked and called it out as unlawful labor.

Jesus' response is noteworthy in that he refuses to engage the argument on the ground laid by his opponents. This is how Jewish torah scholarship was often conducted--through legal arguments and persuasive interpretations of scripture. In many ways it was like the arguments between Supreme Court justices and modern legal scholars, looking for precedent and using logic to make a case and win points. Here, however, instead of debating with them about how the gleaning and eating was, in fact, lawful--which may have been a lively and even productive discussion--Jesus tells a story about an even more egregious bit of lawbreaking.

Jesus deconstructs the basic question. Rather than debating what's allowed and not allowed on the Sabbath, he offers a new way to lay hold of the thing behind their question--a new lens to see not simply the Sabbath commandment but the entire law of God. Like the grain in the field, given as food for the people and animals who need it to survive, the gifts of Sabbath rest are intended for enriching and sustaining the life of the whole creation. People were not made for the heads of ripe grain; the grain is made for the people. So it is with the Sabbath.

Often Jesus answers his opponents' challenging questions with a new question. Here he punctuates his response with a declaration. He is not inviting more debate, but offering--to the Pharisees, his hearers, and us (the readers)--the sabbath as the same kind of liberating gift it was when first given by God.

Week Five

Theme: *Bring Wild Kindness*

Texts: *1 Kings 17:1-16*

Matthew 5:38-48

Hymn and Song Suggestions

"Rise Up" by Bifrost Arts

"All the People Say Amen" - by Matt Maher

“For the One” - by Jenn Johnson
“Called Me Higher” - by Leslie Jordan
ELW #677 - This Little Light of Mine
ELW #670 - Build Us Up
ELW #659 - Will You Let Me Be Your Servant

Prayer of the Day: God of Justice and love, you remind us through an interaction between a widow and a prophet that simple kindness can change lives and lead to a more just and loving world. The life that Jesus lived ushered in a new reign of kindness that we long to continue as Jesus’ followers. Fill us, O God, with wild kindness, that all people might experience your love through our lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

1 Kings 17:1-16

This passage tells about the time the prophet Elijah was sent to stay with a woman who was not expecting him. She wasn’t expecting anything more than a short and bleak future, in fact. And, truth be told, Elijah was in rough shape at the time, too. God’s act of placing these two people in each other’s path, and the radical kindness each offered the other, resulted in saving their lives and opening a way for God’s future and God’s love to stream into their world and the world of their neighbors.

The books of 1st and 2nd Kings cover a long stretch of time (about 500 years). They tell stories of things that happened from approximately 500 to 1,000 years before Jesus. The two volumes in the book of Kings are about ancient Israel’s and Judah’s rulers--the good ones, the bad ones, and the ugly ones. As these stories describe the reigns of kings they also describe the ways God works with, alongside, or against these leaders. Often God uses other people, including prophets, foreigners, and enemies to influence and redirect and correct these kings. In this story, we meet the prophet Elijah, who has been called to be God’s prophet.

Elijah’s storied career involved delivering news of God’s judgement against a few kings, including a particularly awful Israelite king named Ahab. If you recall our time spent with the book of Amos, you will know that prophets are rarely popular with rulers. As this story begins, Elijah’s life is in danger from Ahab’s assassins. God tells him to go hide in the Wadi Cherith (a *wadi* is a creekbed that runs with water during the rainy season and is usually dry in the dry season). In this little canyon, the fugitive prophet will be tended by ravens.

There are a few places in the Bible where members of the non-human creation demonstrate wisdom and generosity and faithfulness and even kindness in ways that advance God’s plans and save human beings. The ravens--one of the most intelligent and long-lived birds in all creation--are called into service to be agents of God’s practical love, bringing bread to a hungry fugitive (as well as “meat” which could have been mice or pigeons or Lord knows what). This is the ancient animal-acted version of DoorDash. The coptic monks of ancient Egypt loved this story so much that they told a story about one of their first monks, a man named Paul, who was given bread by kind wild ravens each night. Icons of Abba Paul usually include a small black bird with a circular loaf of bread in its mouth in an upper corner. The monks also saw in this story an analogy to Communion, seeing the saving bread delivered unearned and unasked for in the wilderness in the same light as the saving and sustaining body of Christ handed over in the bread at the center of their worship each week.

Back to the story at hand.

Elijah stays alive through the kindness of wild things. The prophet is saved by the generous creation that God calls into service to preserve his life: raven's bread and creek water. When the creek runs dry, God has another saving surprise. God tells Elijah to go to a town in a foreign land to find the home of a woman who believes in the gods of Sidon and find hospitality with her.

The woman is named as a widow, which means she is alone in the world, in charge of her family which consists of a young son. As a widow, the woman of Zarephath doesn't have a big extended family to care for her in bad times, and times were bad in the whole region. Although God indicates that God has "commanded" her to feed him, she doesn't seem to be expecting Elijah. She's out collecting sticks to make a fire to cook THE LAST OF HER FOOD so she and her son can eat a little bit and then get ready to die because of the famine.

Elijah is in pretty bad shape, too. He's been living on bird scraps and creek water for a while, and this foreign woman's hospitality is his last hope. He crossed the border out of his homeland and is now at the mercy of a person he's never met.

Elijah tells her not to be afraid (which is a pretty wildly kind thing to hear from someone you trust, but can be a little weird coming from a dude who just walked into your yard), and to make some food so they can all eat. He promises that the meal and the jug of oil will not run out. She trusts him, and feeds him first-before herself and her son, which is a pretty wild bit of generous hospitality. The woman makes space in her life and her household for this stranger (which is a beautiful definition of hospitality).

Over many days and weeks and months, while they wait for the rain to fall on the land again, they live together, sustained by the food which doesn't run out. This becomes a lifesaving miracle of God's abundance and mercy, even when things seem as bad as they can be.

This could have ended in disaster. What happens instead is that they are both saved (along with the woman's son) because of the faith and trust and kindness that each offers the other, and the unfailing love of God, which is sometimes delivered by unlikely and unexpected creatures and people.

In this story, kindness is anything but an empty gesture. It's more than a feeling of goodwill or "niceness." Whether it comes from a wild raven or a poor widow or a starving, sunburned prophet, kindness shows up in real and present ways, as food for the hungry, space for the homeless, and a word of reassurance. These things make the difference between life and death.

If there's one thing that we hope the camp theme verse from Psalm 33:5 will announce and underscore this summer is that God's love is utterly and amazingly (and unfailingly) generous. It pours out so abundantly that it, in fact, fills the earth. There is no place in creation that is beyond the reach of God's love. Its wildness will not be bound or limited by rules, and its bigness cannot be contained by borders or walls or buildings or barriers. Love finds a way, and God's love in Jesus finds a way to us. In doing so, this love releases our own love in new ways--ways that can be wild and generous and gracious--even in uncertain times and with people we might not have anticipated entering our lives.

Matthew 5:38-48

Chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel includes a version of the beatitudes followed by short bursts of dense and pithy teaching and preaching from Jesus. Matthew's community was hungry for help knowing what a life lived in

faithfulness to Jesus would look like--especially how to live with one another and their neighbors--some of whom had no idea who Jesus was. Other neighbors viewed this new "tribe" of not-quite-Jews with suspicion and scorn. The message of these smashed-together sermons calls and empowers Christians towards lives of responsibility, mutual forgiveness, generosity, and peace.

In an era and culture that was characterized by nationalism and license, that glorified physical and economic power, that obeyed rigid class and gender hierarchies, and that was titillated and entertained by violence, the character of the community commended by Jesus in Matthew stands in striking contrast. Against a culture of basic and ongoing unkindness for anyone who's not part of your special circle, Jesus invites his hearers into a way of living marked by wild and generous kindness of a kind that takes seriously the human dignity of everyone involved.

In these ten verses, Jesus offers counter testimony to both the Bible (see Deuteronomy 19:21) and what seems like common sense. In doing so, he is luring us towards a more complete, or "perfect" way of being human in the world.