



Michigan District
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

Heart Issues

are

HARD ISSUES

**A Sermon Series on Racial Healing
in the Church and for the Community**

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In June, 2020, a number of Detroit Lutheran pastors, District officials, and laity spent a day together looking at how the Church is challenged by the racial divides in our country and what we need in Christ for healing. What these Black Lutheran pastors shared was at times both hard to listen to but also encouraging as we recognized that, no matter what skin color we are blessed to be born with, we are one in Christ.

An idea was conceived—to coordinate a sermon series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community. After that meeting, the District staff noted that the Lectionary readings from September 20 through November 1 (All Saints’ Day) seemed to work alongside the topic of Racial Healing. Seven pastors were asked to write sermons based on the readings, and one family life educator created children’s messages, videos, and family discussion guides. (These individuals are listed on pages 69–70).

We would like to encourage you to utilize not only the sermons during these seven weeks, but also the Bible study *One Nation Under God—Healing Racial Divides in America* written by Rev. Keith Haney and available through Concordia Publishing House.

One other outcome of the June meeting was the creation of the document “Unity in Christ Affirmations.” These statements, approved by the Michigan District Board of Directors, very succinctly state what we think or believe about racism. This document can be found on page 61 and also at michigandistrict.org/unityaffirmations.

Our prayer is that all the congregations in the Michigan District, LCMS would prayerfully consider utilizing this series that intentionally addresses the racial tension in our nation and how God’s chosen saints in Christ Jesus can think, speak, pray, and act.

S.D.G.

Children's Messages and Family Discussion Guides have been created for each sermon. Videos of the children's messages are also available for use. Please download these separately at michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries.

Sermon Series Artwork

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Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 1

Title: All That Matters

Text: Philippians 1:12–30, Epistle lesson for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A

Author: Rev. Dr. Robert Kasper

Outline

Central Thought: In the midst of a society imprisoned by injustice and ripped apart by racial tension, Jesus-followers are called and empowered to be God’s prophetic voice as we speak out and live out “All That Matters.”

I. Introduction

Central Question: How do we go about doing that? How do we lean into our responsibility in this timely opportunity to speak and live as God’s mouthpiece?

- A. Exploration of the Scriptures: Philippians 1:12–30.
- B. Paul had joy, hope, and confidence because he knew what mattered.

II. Two foundation truths that matter

A. Our Identity is wrapped up in Jesus.

- 1. Paul’s identity:
 - a. Paul’s source of identity was not in circumstance.
 - b. Paul’s identity was all wrapped up in Jesus! (Romans 8:37; Phil. 3:5–6, 8–9)
- 2. Our Identity:
 - a. At one time our identity was that of “enemies of God” (Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:3–4)
 - b. Now our identity is wrapped up in Jesus.
 - i. It was given to us in Baptism.
 - ii. It is the only identity that matters.
- 3. Reflection questions: Are we living out our true identity? Do our thoughts, our words, and our actions that the people around us see align with our true identity in Christ?
- 4. How does this matter of identity relate to issues of race in our society? Rev. Keith Haney offers these remarks:

“Although God created mankind as one human race, our sinful, selfish natures have created false lines of color dividing that race. Over the years, these false perceptions about different races have been cooked into the recipe of our culture. We have seen them played out in the media, on television sitcoms, and in books. The challenge now is, how do we get around what we believe to be true and start seeing people as individuals? The apostle Paul gives us a pathway forward—start seeing as God does, not ‘according to the flesh’ (2 Corinthians 5:16). To bring about real healing, we have to find our identity in the new life we have in Christ.”

B. Our life is wrapped up in Jesus.

- 1. In just a few strokes of Paul’s stylus, the Holy Spirit outlines what “living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” looks like:
 - a. “*Standing firm in one spirit*” (vs. 27).
 - b. “*Contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*” (vs. 27).
 - c. Yes, as we dare, in faith, to live out our identity in Christ as the Body of Christ in the society and world, we can anticipate suffering for the sake of Christ (Phil. 2:5ff.).

III. Conclusion

Sermon

Title: All That Matters
Text: Philippians 1:12–30, Epistle lesson for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A
Author: Rev. Dr. Robert Kasper

Central Thought

In the midst of a society imprisoned by injustice and ripped apart by racial tension, Jesus-followers are called and empowered to be God’s prophetic voice as we speak out and live out “All That Matters.”

Introduction

The Church has every right under our nation’s law, and, more importantly, every obligation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ to speak into the political, moral, and social issues facing our United States. Issues of social-economic inequity, historic and systemic racial injustice, a punitive rather than restorative justice system, poorly performing and poorly funded schools in our poorest neighborhoods effectively guaranteeing generational poverty, an atmosphere in which police are more like soldiers in battle than guardians of the peace, and the resultant deaths of black men at the hands of police followed by peaceful protests and vengeful violence all scream for God’s Spirit to speak His peace, His truth, His love, His righteousness, His justice, His hope, and His healing into His world. His people simply must speak His Word. His people must live His life as the Spirit-filled Body of Christ and be emissaries of His new creation and His coming kingdom.

So, how do we go about doing that? How do we lean into our responsibility in this timely opportunity to speak and live as God’s mouthpiece?

Over the next 7 weeks we will consider the appointed readings. We will intentionally address their message from God to His people in the context of the racial tension in our nation and how God’s chosen saints in Christ Jesus can think, speak, pray, and act. We seek the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and power to be our best selves as Christ’s ambassadors to a sin-fallen world; and specifically to address racial issues that are in the forefront today. We will discover that we first need to respond in repentance before God for our own role in racial injustice—whether active or passive, intentional or in ignorance, whether one is black or white. We will also seek God’s healing through Christ’s cross and, from there, carry the message of His cross into our purposeful conversations and active engagements with people who are different from us.

This is not new for us. Older pastors are awesome. I’m thinking of one reason in particular right now: They are very generous with their well-used libraries. I (the author) was personally blessed with nearly two decades’ worth of the Concordia Pulpit. These were volumes containing entire sermons for each Sunday and special day in the year. They were not intended to give a week off of sermon preparation, but to engage the text of Scripture and assist the pastor in framing his thoughts and to perhaps borrow an illustration or two. In my reading of these volumes from the 1950’s through the mid 1960’s, there was no lack of sermons that included very blunt references to the geopolitical issues surrounding the “Cold War” and the threat of nuclear attack. They were intentionally addressing real issues in the context of God’s revealed Word and helping God’s people think biblically about them. Our desire is to do the same with this series.

Occasional references will be made to a very helpful Concordia Publishing House Bible Study written by Rev. Keith Haney. We are grateful for his Spirit-directed work entitled, *One Nation Under God: Healing Racial Divides in America*. It is hoped that everyone will also engage in this Bible Study for spiritual growth and meaningful conversation on the topic.

Turn with me now to the appointed text of God’s Word for today, Philippians 1:12–30.

I’m choosing to take my thematic cue from verse 18. ***“But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice!”***

Do you hear that theme of joy? It’s all over this brief letter Paul wrote to his supportive friends. Yet, as you no doubt know, Paul was in prison as he wrote this letter. He is one who, as a Christ-follower, was on the ragged fringe of society even though he was a Roman citizen. His life could be forfeited at any time. Still, Paul wrote of joy, with joy in his heart.

He was not in a position of power or privilege ... or was he?!

I want to convince you that the Apostle Paul had confidence, and hope, and courage, and humility, and peace, and power, and position, and privilege, and hope, and even joy in the midst of difficulties and suffering because he knew, by faith, “ALL THAT MATTERS;” and you and I can also have those same things as we purposefully live in the midst of the racial unrest that we must not ignore as the people of God. And, my friends, we will need all those assurances to effectively participate in transformative conversations and actions as we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done”.

Two foundation truths that matter:

1. Our identity is wrapped up in Jesus.
2. Our life is wrapped up in Jesus.

Identity

We may self-identify as black or white, European, African, Middle Eastern, South or Central American, or Asian. We may identify with being American, male or female, employed or unemployed, or retired, city dweller or rural-rooted, well-educated or street-smart. These and many more could be identifying marks. But “what does it matter?”

Paul was a prisoner, but that was not his identity. He was “*in chains for Christ*” (verse 13). He was a victim of injustice, but that was not his identity. He was victorious “*in Christ*” (see Romans 8:37). He was powerless to correct those who preached Christ from selfish and destructive motives, but powerless was not his identity. He joyfully responded, “*What does it matter? ... Christ is preached!*” Later in this same letter, Paul confessed that at one time he proudly identified himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” well educated in the Law of God and a devout follower of the legal traditions. He was a “persecutor of the Church,” but he concludes, “*I count it all as rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... having a righteousness that is from God and is by faith!*” (Philippians 3:5–6, 8–9).

Paul’s identity was all wrapped up in Jesus!

Our identity, like Paul’s, is wrapped up in Jesus. In our Baptism, or in our confession of faith in Christ, we were made children of God. We bear His name! We are individually and collectively the Temple of the Holy Spirit! All this is only by the grace of God connecting us by faith to the accomplished work of Jesus on the cross! This single identity is “ALL THAT MATTERS”! Every other identifying mark pales in comparison!

At one time our identity was that of “*enemies of God*” (Romans 5:10), “*by nature objects of wrath*” and “*dead in our sin*” (Ephesians 2:3–4). Our original identity as God’s personally created image-bearers in His universe has been twisted and trashed by our sinful rebellion, both inherited and intentional. And apart from Jesus Christ, that is still the destitute identity of every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth, and ours too without God’s action on our behalf in Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior.

The challenge that confronts us is the question: “Are we living out our true identity? Do our thoughts, our words, and our actions that the people around us see align with our true identity in Christ?”

How does this matter of identity relate to issues of race in our society? Rev. B. Keith Haney offers these remarks:

Although God created mankind as one human race, our sinful, selfish natures have created false lines of color dividing that race. Over the years, these false perceptions about different races have been cooked into the recipe of our culture. We have seen them played out in the media, on television sitcoms, and in books. The challenge now is, how do we get around what we believe to be true and start seeing people as individuals? The apostle Paul gives us a pathway forward—start seeing as God does, not “according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 5:16). To bring about real healing, we have to find our identity in the new life we have in Christ.

As biblical Christians and followers of Jesus, we must view every neighbor on our planet as a beloved image-bearer of God, a broken sinner under God’s righteous wrath, redeemed by Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross, and welcomed as a forgiven child only by faith in the victorious risen Jesus. This must be our view of everyone whether black or white, rich or poor, Christian or non-Christian, conservative or liberal, citizen or illegal alien, immigrant by choice and opportunity or immigrant by force on a slave ship.

Holy Spirit, lead us to repent of identifying ourselves or others as anything else. “ALL THAT MATTERS” is one’s identity in Jesus Christ.

Life

Secondly, the Holy Spirit through Paul instructs us that our identity in Christ is to be lived out in our daily relationships. Right on the heels of declaring his ultimate confident faith in the face of potential death, “*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (vs. 21), Paul gives this encouragement: “*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*” (vs. 27). In other words, not only is our **identity** wrapped up in Jesus, our **life** is wrapped up in Jesus, and therefore, secure in Christ’s resurrection life for eternity, how we live each day makes a difference in the Church and in the world.

In just a few strokes of Paul’s stylus, the Holy Spirit outlines what “*living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*” looks like:

1. “*Standing firm in one spirit, contending as one man*” (vs. 27). We are united. We stand together. All for one and one for all. We cannot be divided no more than a human body can be divided and survive. We share a common identity in Christ. That’s true in the Church. In the broader society, inclusive of Christians and non-Christians alike, we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We are all united in one human family, regardless of color, position, or ethnicity. So also in our nation our focus must be more on our unity while celebrating our diversity without division. And as believers in the God of creation, the Church has a critical message to share. We must affirm with a loud, prophetic voice the great value every human being has in God’s eyes.
2. “*Contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*” (vs. 27). Yes, we are united, but what unites us is not our willpower. Rather, we are united by our common faith in Jesus. We are also united in action. Namely, we are “contending for the faith of the gospel.” Now that word “contending” is not limited to making sure our doctrine is pure. Indeed, our call is not just to “protect” the gospel as though God needed our defense. No, we are to intentionally and intensely work together to advance the Gospel, to be the emissaries of His coming kingdom. Jesus outlined His kingdom mission as He initiated His public ministry reading from Isaiah the prophet: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18–19). All of God’s promises stand fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 1:20). After His victorious resurrection, Jesus said to his followers, “*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you ... Receive the Holy Spirit.*” We, as the Spirit-empowered Body of Christ, continue to “contend as one man” as we join with Jesus on His kingdom mission. His mission includes fighting injustice, being a voice for the disenfranchised, defending the weak, working to release those held captive by poverty and poor education, bringing healing to broken lives, and reconciliation to fractured relationships including those between black and white. As one of our LCMS educators put it in a recent blog, “Do I, as a teacher, want to just be the keeper of correctness or an agent of access?” Such an attitude should also be ours as we “contend for the faith of the gospel.”
3. The final mark of living in a “manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” is framed by Paul with these words: “*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.*” Yes, as we dare, in faith, to live out our identity in Christ as the Body of Christ in the society and world, we can anticipate suffering for the sake of Christ. Even as Jesus did not grasp or hold onto his position with the Father, but humbled himself and became man and was obedient to the Father even to death on the cross (Philippians 2:5ff), so we are called to suffer alongside those who suffer and seek to relieve their suffering. Did you know that, for example, in 2014, the median income of a white household was \$71,300 and the median income of a black household was \$43,300? (I see this distinction every time I do a demographic study for one of our congregations in the Michigan District. It’s sobering!). Of those households headed by someone with a college degree, a white household’s median income was \$106,600 and that of a black, college-educated household was only \$82,300? Did you know that a black man is three times more likely to be searched during a routine traffic stop than a white man, and a black man is six times more likely to go to jail than a white man? This is evidence of “white privilege” in our society and an example of the great disparity among us. Add to these the attending issues of education and job opportunities that only expand the divide. Still, in Christ, we are called by the Spirit to release our grip on white privilege or black victimhood, whichever is your assumed position. Failure to acknowledge and release our prideful posture will only keep us divided and unable and unwilling to have the hard conversations we need to have with one another. And we will fail to engage in the hard work that needs to be done.

Conclusion

Followers of Jesus can no longer allow black or other marginalized people to be the political pawns of the “Left” or the “Right.” This is not a political issue for us, but a biblical one. We must engage in the work and enter the suffering of others. The people of God must speak ... first to ourselves and repent; and then also to our neighbor, whatever color he/she may be. We can expect to be misunderstood, mistreated, disenfranchised, muffled, and marginalized. We may even expect persecutions as we take our stand with Jesus and speak truth to falsehood and follow Jesus’ straight path in a crooked and twisted world. But our identity is always wrapped up in Christ; and our life is always securely wrapped up in Christ. That’s ALL THAT MATTERS.

Amen.

Bible references are from the ESV, NIV, and NASB.

Children's Message

Title: Identity
Corresponds with: All That Matters
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 1 - Identity
michigandistrict.org/heartissuesermonseries

Good Morning! This week we are learning about identity. Do you know what identity is? It's everything that makes you-you! Part of it is what I see when I look at you. God made us all different: eye color, hair color and style, skin color, faces, and height.

When we look at someone we don't know, that's all we can see—the outside of their identity. But when God looks at us, He knows us inside and out! And He loves us completely! God sees our complete identity, everything that we are: what we look like on the outside, and our inside. But when he looks at our inside, instead of looking at all the things we do, say, and think, He sees Jesus.

God loved us so fully and completely that He didn't want the things we do wrong, our sins, to be part of our identity and keep us away from Him, our perfect God. So He sent His Son Jesus to live the perfect life that we aren't able to do, and die a perfect death which took all our sins away. Because of Jesus' life, death, and rising from the dead after beating the devil, we get to live in heaven forever with God!

Our challenge today is to start seeing other people as God does. We are called to see and love their outside, to get to know them on the inside, but most of all, to see them as part of our family—someone God loved enough to die for. John 1:12 says, *"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."*

If that person is part of our family, how do we treat them? We love them, stand up for them, comfort them when they're hurt or sad, and do nice things for them. We do this for others because God loved us enough to do it for us first.

Let's pray. Repeat after me:

Dear God // Thank you for loving me // inside and out // and making my identity // as part of your family. // Help me to love others // in this same way // no matter how different // they may be // In Jesus' name // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: All That Matters
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 1 - Identity
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. We learned in the sermon that Paul was in jail while he was writing the book of the Bible called Philippians. He was in jail because he was telling others about Jesus. Talk about how Paul could be in jail for doing the “right thing,” preaching about Jesus. What are some hard things that God calls us to do that might not put us in jail, but are not easy to do? (Example: loving people who are mean or who don't agree with us, forgiving others even when they aren't sorry, obeying God's will for our lives instead of our own, etc).
2. Take turns describing your outer identity (physical attributes) and inner identity (personality traits or values). What are things you have in common? What differences do you have?
3. Tell a story of when someone treated you negatively because you were different.
4. Think of your favorite movies, shows, books, or toys. Where do you see diversity in outer identity: people with different abilities, races, and genders. Where do you see diversity in inner identity: different beliefs, ideas, and languages. Mention that ALL identities are loved by God.
5. The sermon said *“As Biblical Christians and followers of Jesus, we must view every neighbor on our planet as a beloved image-bearer of God, a broken sinner under God's righteous wrath, redeemed by Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, and welcomed as a forgiven child only by faith in the victorious risen Jesus.”* Put this sentence into your own words. Do this phrase by phrase if necessary.
6. The sermon said, *“In our nation our focus must be more on our unity while celebrating our diversity without division.”* What do you think celebrating diversity looks like? What do you think keeps people from celebrating diversity? Where can you celebrate unity in diversity?
7. The sermon said we are called to join with Jesus on His mission, which includes *“fighting for justice, being a voice for the disenfranchised, defending the weak, working to release those held captive by poverty and poor education, bringing healing to broken lives, and reconciliation to fractured relationships including those between black and white.”* How can your family partner with Jesus on this mission? Which part stands out to you? What can you do to get involved? What have you already done?

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Father God, we praise you for making such a wonderful creation. You created people that reflect every part of your beauty. However, we as a people are damaged by sin. We repent for not seeing true identity as You do. We get caught up on things that divide us and let our own preferences get in the way of loving and caring for others. Thank you, God, for forgiving us where we have done, thought, and spoken wrong. Please give us courage to speak of the unity we share in Christ as part of your family. Use your Holy Spirit inside each of us to make us bold to love all people and put that love into action by joining Jesus on His mission in our daily lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 2

Outline

Title: Whom Shall I Love and Whom Shall I Fear?
Text: Philippians 2:1–18, Epistle lesson for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A
Author: Rev. Brian Dupre

Preface

- I. God intends His people to be united.
 - A. Fear and hatred of one another is not consistent with God’s will.
We are called to be united in Christ rather than divided by Satan.
 - B. The entire text can be summed up by the second greatest commandment: to love our neighbor as ourselves.
Who is my neighbor? Everyone who is not me. Who is your neighbor? Everyone who is not you. We are to love everyone who is not ourselves as we love ourselves.

- II. Why is this hard to do?
 - A. Because we pass judgment on each other.
We have deemed some people as not worthy of our love.
This has caused people to treat others poorly.
 - B. But love is not optional, it is a commandment.

- III. Let me share with you a couple stories:
 - A. Visitors are not welcomed in the church because of the color of their skin.
 - B. A pastor from the community said, White people aren’t allowed in Black churches.
Side note: There is no such thing as a Black church nor a White church.

- IV. Important Questions
 - A. Two important questions Jesus poses for us to answer:
 1. Whom shall we love? Matthew 22:37–39
 2. Whom shall we fear? Matthew 10:28
 - B. All too common answers.
 1. Whom do we love? Those who are just like us.
 2. Whom do we fear? Everyone who is not just like us.
Philippians states in verses 2–4, “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

- V. Unity begins with the belief that:
 - A. That which unites us is greater than that which divides us.
 - B. It is not about me. It’s about Christ.

- VI. God has given us His grace in Jesus.
 - A. God has given us His Word to strengthen us.
 - B. The Holy Spirit through God’s means of grace transforms our hearts as we strive to glorify our father by:
 1. Treating all people with respect.
 2. Talking to people of color and learn to see society through their experiences.
 3. Seeking to become a prayer partner with an African American Christian.
 4. Visiting a congregation that is culturally different/more racially diverse than your own.

Sermon

Title: Whom Shall I Love and Whom Shall I Fear?
Text: Philippians 2:1–18, Epistle lesson for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A
Author: Rev. Brian Dupre

Greeting: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Preface

You know, every time I read the story of the Good Samaritan, new revelations come to mind and the Holy Spirit speaks to me, helping me to see different scenarios each time.

As I prepared to write this sermon in light of the series “Heart Issues are Hard Issues,” it occurred to me that what happened in that story happens every day here in these United States. Please understand, I am speaking in generalities; what I am about to say does not apply to every person.

There are two infections White Americans are suffering from. The first is invisibility. They simply cannot or will not see Black America. They can go an entire lifetime—by choice or by circumstance—having no contact at all with a person of color. The reverse is virtually impossible.

The second is immunity—the inherent knowledge that they can do whatever they want because of the freedoms our constitution allows and because they are the majority. This has led many to see themselves as dominant and superior to the minority, to the point of not considering them human.

For these two reasons, White Americans can beat and bloody Black Americans, leaving them half-dead by the side of the road, and then pass by on the other side without caring to see or offering aid.

These infections have become a conditioned response borne of years of misunderstanding and fed by political and economic agendas and sociological fears. It continues to grow and fester due to lack of real interest in engaging one another with open minds and hearts. But you see, we cannot allow politics or any other agenda to define what humanity means since it has already been defined by God.

Conversely, Black Americans are suffering from “whipped dog syndrome,” which has put many of them in “fight of flight” mode. By flight I mean many have given up hope that their circumstances can be changed or overcome, regardless of political leadership. The temptation is to remain segregated for protection, trust, and prosperity.

By fight I mean many have chosen to fight for their rights, survival, freedoms, and continued existence. These “fights” have taken form in the constitutionally guaranteed right to protest peacefully. But when this right is denied, taken away or repelled by physical attacks by the powers that be, is it any wonder all hell breaks loose? Is there any wonder why the frustration of never being heard or cared for or about leads to riots? The irony here is that the victims are usually attributed the blame.

If we can understand these things about ourselves, maybe then we can build bridges over the black-white divide and learn to love as Christ loves despite our differences.

Text

In fear and hatred of one another is not the way God intended His creation, people of all race, creed, and color to behave or to treat each other. This text from Philippians chapter 2 clearly shows us that God wants ALL His people to be united in Christ, not divided by Satan. The entire text can be summed up by the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Who is my neighbor? Everyone who is not me. Who is your neighbor? Everyone who is not you. We are to love everyone who is not ourselves as we love ourselves.

Yet that is the very thing we find hardest to do. Why? Because we have passed and continue to pass judgment on each other by the way we look, walk, speak, think, and even the clothes we wear, just to name a few. We have deemed some people as not worthy of our love. We hold ourselves up as the “ideal” of what a person should be and therefore if you aren’t just like us, you are less important, maybe even insignificant. Therefore, we don’t have to love you. This has caused people to treat others any way they wanted to, regardless of how evil it may have been. But love is not optional, it is a commandment.

Arrogance, hatred, entitlement, impatience, self-reliance, self-gratification, self-importance, and selfishness are the tools and devices the devil uses against us to separate us, to tempt us to hate each other and draw us away from our faith in and love for Christ. But these things can only happen if we let them. The question for all God’s people is: whom do we love and whom do we fear?

Let me share with you a couple stories:

1. On my vicarage assignment in a northern suburb of Saint Louis, I was asked by my supervising pastor to walk the neighborhood and invite the people to church. Now the congregation I was serving was primarily White, but the neighborhood was primarily Black.

This sounded like a great outreach opportunity, especially for the blending of cultures in God’s house. However, the reality did not match the opportunity. Every person I talked to said they had tried to attend the church previously, but were ushered out with the words, *“You will be happier at the church down the street.”*

2. Last month, I met a man outside a store in Ann Arbor. While we waited for our turn for service, we struck up a conversation, which quickly turned to Christianity and the churches. Although he was White and I Black, we found a lot of commonality.

Again, this sounded like a great outreach opportunity. I invited him to my church. Again, however, the reality did not match the opportunity. Even though I shared with him that Shadow of the Cross is a cross-cultural church, he declined the invitation. His reason was he was told recently by a Black pastor that White people are not allowed in Black churches in order to maintain their identities as Black churches.

Let me be clear: there is no such thing as a Black church nor a White church. There is only the Christian church, to which everyone is welcome. We cannot continue to allow the devil to trick us into believing otherwise. There is no room for “separate but equal” within the Christian church; not if we are to be united in Christ. Jesus died for us all, equally, on the cross of Calvary, where He demonstrated His love equally.

I call this message, “Whom shall we love and whom shall we fear?” Scripture tells us in Matthew 22:37–39, *“And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

It also tells us in Matthew 10:28, *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* Here God clearly tells us to love Him above all things and to love everyone else only second to Himself. He also tells us to fear Him only. Nothing and no one else can destroy both soul and body.

Knowing this, we, followers of Christ, should examine ourselves asking, “Whom DO we love and whom DO we fear?” Unfortunately, the answer to whom do we love is too often those who are just like us. And the answer to whom do we fear is everyone who is not just like us.

I suggest to you that those who do not love Christ, do not know or understand nor have taken the time to get to know Christ. I also suggest that those who do not love people different from themselves, do not know or understand, nor have they taken the time to get to know people different from themselves. Therefore, there can be no love without knowledge or understanding.

The heart of Paul’s message to the Philippians is stated in verses 2–4: *“Complete my joy by being of the same mind,*

having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

If we are to ever have true unity within the Church, we are going to have to truly believe this: that which unites us is infinitely greater than that which divides us; meaning our love for and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

If we are ever going to have peace, love, and understanding between the races, the first thing we have to grasp is “it’s not about me.” It’s about Christ, and what we can do to help our brothers and sisters we share the earth with. Feelings of superiority and inferiority are Satan’s way of keeping us separated, infuriated, and uneducated about our cultural differences.

Just as conceit breeds entitlement, jealousy breeds contempt. Satan would like nothing more than to keep the races at each other’s throats. As long as we are at each other’s throats, there is no chance for reconciliation and little chance for light of love to shine.

But God has not forsaken us. He has given us His Word to study and contemplate. He has given us prayer. He has granted us forgiveness. He has given us His Holy Spirit for comfort, strength, and guidance. God has given us the ability to overcome temptations. He has given us the ability to say no to sin. James 4:6–7 says, “... *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*” Do not fear, but trust God’s promises and providence.

The truth is many of us aren’t even trying to resist. Some of us enjoy the chaos of racism. Some of us don’t want the unity Christ desires for us and His church on earth. Some of us have hardened our hearts so much that we may not even love ourselves. 1 John 3:15 warns us, “*Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.*”

We thank God, however, that there are many people of all races who are tired of the nonsense and racial injustices; who are willing to lay down their lives, if necessary, like Jesus did, for the betterment of society, the uplifting of the church, the upholding of justice, the encouragement of relationships between all peoples, and the common good.

God has brought together many of us who do know and love Him to teach, preach, pray, and give praise. We come from all races and all walks of life to share the Good News of our resurrected Lord with all we come in contact with. And to teach that everyone we come in contact with is our neighbor. The fruits of our faith are the good works we do to create unity within the church and among the people. We do not glorify ourselves but thank God for creating burning desires in us to serve. Together, we will serve until His will is fulfilled. I pray we will be the instruments by which this is accomplished. Do not grow weary of the work God has called us to do.

You see, God will restore unity to His church; the same type of unity enjoyed by the apostles and first Christians, being of one mind and of one accord, and having love, sympathy, compassion and affection for all, knowing that God desires none to perish. I encourage you to remain faithfully committed to serving the Lord in whatever capacity he has charged you. Do not lose hope because it appears evil is winning. Remember, Jesus has already conquered sin, Satan, death, and hell. Do not be deceived by the devil’s tricks beheld by your eyes.

This is how God has commanded us to live. I said earlier that through the study of God’s Word we can learn to build bridges over the Black-White divide, and these are some of the ways we can make it happen:

- Treat all people with respect.
- Talk to people of color and learn to see the society through their experiences.
- Seek to become a prayer partner with an African American Christian.
- Visit a congregation that is culturally different/more racially diverse than your own.
- Listen and learn.

This evil age is passing away. Disunity is passing away. Hatred and selfishness must give way to love and selflessness.

Christ will return and make all things new again. For those of us who have been given the wisdom to separate truth from rhetoric by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can see that all the vileness of the present is merely the birth pains of the coming era; the ushering in of the new heaven and new earth.

If you ask anyone, any soldier of the cross who has been called and enlightened by the Holy Spirit the question “Whom shall I love?” the answer will be universal—the Lord God, and my neighbor. If you ask any soldier of the cross who has been called and enlightened by the Holy Spirit the question “Whom shall I fear?” the answer will be universal—the Lord God only. Amen.

Bible references are from the ESV and NIV.

Children's Message

Title: The Good Samaritan
Corresponds with: Whom Shall I Love and Whom Shall I Fear?
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 2 -The Good Samaritan
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

Have you ever heard of the story of the Good Samaritan? A man was talking to Jesus and knew he had to love his neighbor, so he asked Jesus who all was included in the word neighbor. Jesus then told him a story about a man who was robbed and beaten up. This man in the story was discovered by many people who were like him—they believed in the same God and came from the same neighborhood, but they didn't help him. Finally, a man came who was very different and was actually the enemy of the man who was hurt. Do you think he helped the man? He did!

Why do you think Jesus told this story? He knows it is easy to love people who are like us. People who agree with you, people who look like you, and people who think the same things as you. BUT God calls us to love ALL people! In Philip-pians 2:4 it says *"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others,"* which means don't only look out for yourself, but love and care for others!

Did Jesus only die for people who loved Him perfectly and treated Him nice and always respected Him? No! He died for all people of all time. Jesus lived a life where he always loved people perfectly: He spoke the truth, He helped people with their needs, and He told them how to live forever in heaven. Then Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead after defeating Satan. He did that so all the imperfect people He loved would be made whole again. Their sins would be taken away from them, so they could live forever in heaven with Him. This includes all of us!

In our world today, Satan tries to use anything he can to make people seem different and unlovable. We are divided against each other: black and white, Republican and Democrat, rich and poor, Christians and Muslims. But we know the truth: we were all created and loved by God, and we are all called to love God first and love each other second. So when you find yourself thinking someone is unlovable, remember how much God has loved you and ask Him to help you love others.

Let's pray about that now. Repeat after me:

Dear God, // You love me perfectly. // Use me // to give this love // to all people. // Help me to show // the devil is wrong // and all people // deserve love. // In Jesus' name, // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: Whom Shall I Love and Whom Shall I Fear?
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 2 - The Good Samaritan
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. Read the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. Retell this story as if it was happening in present day.
2. A: If you are a white family: Where do you see limited sight (going about your day purposely or unknowingly having no contact with a person of color) or immunity (living your life not realizing the freedoms and biases in your favor as a member of the majority race) in your life?

B: If you are a black family: Do you feel the fight (frustration about not being heard or seen causing feelings or actions of resentment) or flight (loss of hope in change resulting in choosing to self-segregate) instinct more strongly?

C: If you are a multi-racial family: Choose to explore either or both options.
3. Where do you see a black/white divide in your life? How could God work through you to build a bridge and bring unity?
4. Who in your life (a group or a specific person) is hard to love? How is that person different from you? What do you have in common?
5. Is your church mainly one race? Is everyone the same income level, education level, age? How can your family demonstrate God's love in the way you might react to someone different entering your church?
6. List things you know about Jesus and how they cause you to love them. Do the same about members of your family. What do you know about God and His Word that helps us to love people we don't even know?
7. God has given His church the Bible, forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, and the ability to overcome temptation. Which of these tools given by God to fight against Satan's divisions is most meaningful to you?
8. Pastor has described Christians as soldiers of the cross. Explain why you think this is true.

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Dear God, you have called us to love you with our whole heart. You are so worthy of our love because you have loved us perfectly, but we have failed you. We have loved other things more than you. You have called us to love others as much as we love ourselves, but we have failed you. We choose to ignore our neighbor or only love them on our own terms. Father, forgive us. Work in our hearts through your Holy Spirit to keep you first in our hearts and minds. Help us to grow in faith in you and fervent love toward one another. Amen.

Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 3

Outline

Title: Bringing the Fruit of His Steadfast Love

Text: Philippians 3:4b–14, Epistle lesson for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A

Author: Rev. Michael Grannis

- I. The Old Testament lesson today develops the imagery of wild grapes
 - A. Wild grapes have no redeeming quality.
 - B. Wild grapes were the unexpected crop in the Lord's vineyard.

- II. The Gospel lesson for today also speaks of the Lord's vineyard.
 - A. God placed the people in the vineyard to tend the vineyard.
 - B. In pride, the people attempted to use the vineyard for their own benefit.

- III. In the Epistle lesson, Paul talks about his boast.
 - A. Paul had many reasons to boast in the flesh.
 - B. The Holy Spirit showed Paul that his reasons for boasting were like rubbish.
 - C. God gives authority and influence not so that people would be honored, but so that people would use that authority and influence to honor and glorify Him.

- IV. The issue of prejudice and injustice based on skin color are in the spotlight.
 - A. In pride, people have made enemies of one-time friends.
 - B. Christians look for enemies of their cause.
 1. Their search places them on the wrong side of the battle line:
 - a. Standing up for and rallying behind injustice on one side or lawlessness on another.
 - b. Prejudice on one side or violence and destruction on the other.
 - C. We have an enemy in this world, but the real enemy isn't flesh and blood.
 1. We mistake people for the enemy because of our own sinful inability to see people the way God sees them.
 - a. It grows out of our sinful rebellion from the will of God.
Rev. Haney -
"Like Isaiah's wild grapes, or Christ's vineyard tenants, God's people today are under a real threat of finding ourselves opposing God, regardless of what earthly stance we may take on the issues of our day. However, God's desire for us (His New Testament vineyard) is still the same as it was for His Old Testament people. God chose us to reveal His will and salvation to a world in need."

- V. God wants us to live according to His will and ways, trusting in Him.
 - A. He wants us to live in just ways.
 - B. He does not want us to be the reason for people to cry out.
 - C. God calls on His people to stand in the gap of hatred, bringing the fruit of His steadfast love. This is the good fruit He desires to see in the vineyard of His people.

- VI. But it will make us a target for the attacks of Satan.
 - A. It will make us hated by those set on division and destruction.

- VII. God's provision for us
 - A. The Word of Christ (connected to the true vine);
 - B. God will clothe and equip us with His spiritual armor to withstand all that comes against us;
 - C. God works in our world through means to communicate His steadfast love and faithfulness.

Illustration: Three teens trying to describe the brownie taste.

Point: The fruit of God is not meant to be looked at or described. It is meant to be experienced. It is meant to be enjoyed by those who receive it. It is meant to nurture and strengthen the one who receives it.

- VIII. The most impactful and meaningful way for Christians to heal the sinful divides in our world is through faithful, fruitful living.
- A. This is faith that others can taste.
 - B. Standing up for what is right is important, but it is meaningless without right living.

Conclusion: In a few minutes, we will be invited up to the altar to receive God's grace, mercy and forgiveness applied to each of us.

Sermon

Title: Bringing the Fruit of His Steadfast Love
Text: Philippians 3:4b–14, Epistle lesson for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A
Author: Rev. Michael Grannis

Servants of God, set apart and made holy in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, bless us today with the presence of Your Holy Spirit within us. Prepare us to hear and take to heart Your Holy Word. Redeem us from our sinful fruit and produce the good fruits You desire to harvest in our lives. Strengthen our faith in Christ, so that we may let go of our earthly pride which labels others as our enemies. Control us by the love of Christ, displayed for us in the shedding of His precious blood, so that we might forget what lies behind and strain forward toward the goal of being worthy of the upward call of God. Through Jesus Christ, the true vine. Amen.

Wild grapes ... wild grapes are spoken of in our Old Testament lesson for today [Isaiah 5:1-7]. They are not spoken of kindly. They are the undesired, unexpected fruit of the LORD's vineyard (His people).

May I see a show of hands. Have any of you ever had homemade wine? Well, there is a pastor who, while serving as a vicar, had an experience in wine tasting he will not soon forget. One of his congregation members dabbled in wine making. This member had several homemade bottles on hand of a few different varieties. On one visit to the member's home, the vicar was sent home with two bottles of wine. One of them was made from some grapevines the man had purchased and planted and cultivated in his garden. However, one of the bottles he marked as being "wild."

He told the vicar that he had found some grapevines growing wild along the fences of his property and decided he would make some wine with them. He had quite a few bottles of the "wild" wine, and the vicar was more than happy to take a bottle off of his hands and sample something that promised to be a unique experience.

Well, unique it was. The "tame" variety was tasty enough. Not the best wine the vicar had ever tasted, but enjoyable. The "wild" wine, however, was a different story. The vicar was not easily put off or offended by most wines. That being said, this wine made from "wild" grapes ... and, he was not prepared for it.

The wine was bitter. It was sour. It was ... well, you know how sometimes people describe certain foods as having an "earthy" quality or flavor? Usually they mean it in a good way, right? Well, this had a "dirty" quality to it, in the worst possible sense. And none of this should reflect poorly on the winemaking skills of the congregation member. Again, the vicar had the "tame" wine by means of comparison. They were night-and-day different. There was not one redeeming quality of the "wild" wine.

What is the point of this story? Simply put, wild grapes are offensive. They are utterly unenjoyable, sickening, disgusting. They have no redeeming quality. And when you are the winemaker expecting something special, something enjoyable; when you have worked hard preparing the soil and pruning and harvesting; when you have pressed and filtered and prepared your wine for fermentation; when you have waited long weeks or months for your creation to come into its own, only to have it turn out to be a complete and utter waste—a waste of time, a waste of effort—that is an embarrassment and offense! Wild grapes don't make for a proud winemaker, and those who partake of them aren't too happy either.

But we are not talking about wine here, folks. We are not talking about actual wild grapes. We are talking about God's people. God's people and the fruit produced in our lives. In the Isaiah passage, the wild grapes are held up by the prophet in his parable to represent the bad fruits produced by God's people; fruits of injustice and of bloodshed. The prophet cries out against their evil ways. The people of God had abandoned His ways and as a result they had proclaimed war on God and the righteousness of God. They had made themselves enemies of God.

Similarly, in our Gospel reading [Matthew 21:33–46] we hear Christ rebuking the religious leaders of God's people. They were set in place by God to tend the vineyard of His people. They were to cultivate and grow their faith, protecting them from the attacks of the devil and the tempting, sinful draw of our fallen world. They were to help produce the fruit God desired to see and then present Him with the bounty.

However, in their sin, the religious authorities pitted themselves and God's people against God and His ways. They had become drunk on the desire to be honored—drunk with the power God had placed into their hands for the good of the people. They craved the comfort that the world offered over the righteousness of God. They allied themselves with the ways of the devil and the world and saw God and His ways (His very Salvation) as their enemy.

We see this same sinful pride described in the Epistle lesson as Paul explains all of the reasons he has for boasting in the flesh. As a Jewish man trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel (the most notable rabbi of the Pharisees in his day), Paul had every reason to boast in his earthly pedigree. We see early on, before His conversion, that as Saul he took great offense at Jesus and any who believed in Him and followed His teaching. The way of Christ threatened the pride of Saul; it threatened the pride of the Pharisees and the scribes and the chief priests. It threatened the pride of the Jews, and Samaritans, and Gentiles alike. It threatened everyone from kings and governors to tax collectors and beggars. And why was that? Because Christ's way—God's way—is no respecter of persons.

God gives authority and influence not so that people would be honored, but so that people would use that authority and influence to honor and glorify Him. God gives knowledge and wisdom not for people to be big-headed but to reveal Himself as the giver of all that is true and good. God gives His Law and Gospel not to puff up His people, but to reveal our need for salvation and to reveal Jesus, our means of Salvation. All of these gifts from God are given to us for His glory and honor. Which brings us back to this time and moment in our world ...

In our world today, issues of prejudice and injustice based on skin color and ethnic origin are in the spotlight once again. These deeply personal issues have caused people to take a stand and choose sides. People have made enemies of one-time friends, and allied themselves with others they once considered enemies. And it is easy to look around and see examples of self-professed followers of Christ doing very un-Christ-like things, and this is true of Christians on all sides of these issues.

Christians everywhere are identifying enemies of their cause and, as they are, they keep finding themselves on the wrong side of the battle line; they are standing up for and rallying behind injustice on one side of lawlessness or another ... prejudice on one side or violence and destruction on the other. And all the while Satan is laughing and mocking us as the world falls apart ... as we help to tear it apart.

Yes, we have an enemy in this world, but when we rally behind the causes of the world, we will undoubtedly end up mistaking our real enemy. And where does this misidentification come from? It comes from our own desire for glory and honor. It has its root in our own sinful inability to see people the way God sees them. It grows out of our sinful rebellion from the will of God, even as Satan (our true enemy) lashes out at us with every weapon at his disposal.

In session 2 of the Bible study series titled *One Nation Under God: Healing Racial Divides in America*, Rev. Haney not only identifies Satan as our true enemy when dealing with issues of prejudice, injustice, and earthly divisions, he also helps us to see how God has equipped His people through the Word and Spirit to address these issues in Christ-like, godly ways.

Like Isaiah's wild grapes, or Christ's vineyard tenants, God's people today are under a real threat of finding ourselves opposing God, regardless of what earthly stance we may take on the issues of our day. However, God's desire for us (His New Testament vineyard) is still the same as it was for His Old Testament people. God chose us to reveal His will and salvation to a world in need.

God wants us to live according to His will and ways, trusting in Him. He wants us to live in just ways. He wants to see us use whatever power or influence we have to help bring about justice and peace in the world. He does not desire to see us standing by, allowing innocent blood to be shed. He does not want us to be the reason for people to cry out. He wants us to promote what is right and to do what is right in our lives, no matter what position or influence we may be jeopardizing, or what power we may lack. He surely does not want us to be the ones inflicting violence, insult, and injury onto others. He does not want us to promote such behavior in others or to justify others for doing so.

No, God calls on His people to stand in the gap of hatred, bringing the fruit of His steadfast love. God calls on us to stand in the gap of injustice, bringing His faithfulness to bear. This is the good fruit He desires to see in the vineyard of His people. But it will make us a target for the attacks of Satan. It will make us hated by those set on division and destruction. But by remaining in the Word of Christ (connected to the true vine) God will clothe and equip us with His spiritual armor to withstand all that comes against us. Yes, through us God will be glorified even in these contentious times.

You see, God works in our world through means to communicate His steadfast love and faithfulness. In His grace and mercy, He chose to use the people of Israel, and when those grapes went wild He continued with His faithful plan to reveal Himself to the world and redeem all who would put their trust in Him through Christ. After all, this was His plan all along: to reveal Himself and produce His salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—God in the flesh.

Yes, God works through means. He worked salvation for us in the person of Christ. He uses the Word and Sacraments to produce and strengthen our faith in Him. And just as He formed and raised up the people of Israel to reveal Himself to the nations, He has cut off the fruitless branches of Israel and grafted into the ancient vine of Christ a new people, the Church. We are the branches whose purpose it is to produce the good fruits that our Vinedresser desires to see in our world. Does He need us to reveal and accomplish His will? No! But He chooses to use us for this good and gracious purpose.

During the opening devotion of a confirmation retreat, a guest pastor for the weekend gave an interesting object lesson. He invited three youth up to each enjoy a brownie. After tasting it they were supposed to try to describe how it tasted, to describe the experience of eating that little piece of chocolaty goodness. They each described it differently, but all of them agreed it was delicious. Try as they might, however, nothing they could say in their explanation could make anybody else in the group experience the sheer joy that was going on in their mouths. The point is this: God's people are called to be doers of the Word, not just faithful hearers of it. Not just speakers of it, but doers of it.

Like those kids eating those brownies, the fruit of God is not meant to be looked at or described. It is meant to be experienced. It is meant to be enjoyed by those who receive it. It is meant to nurture and strengthen the one who receives it.

The most impactful and meaningful way for Christians to heal the sinful divides in our world is through faithful, fruitful living. This is faith that others can taste. It is not tasted by explaining the grace of God to others, but by letting people experience the goodness of God through us. It is not tasted through our warring against those we disagree with, but by being loving, just, humble, and forgiving; through this kind of faithful living by God's people, the world will be able to "*taste and see that the LORD is good*" (Psalm 34:8).

Standing up for what is right is important, but it is meaningless without right living. We are the branches of Jesus, the true Vine. God has created and cultivated the Church of Christ so that we might produce the good fruit of His will. He planted and cultivated us so that we might bear the fruit of His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, and apply it in the lives of those around us.

In a few minutes we will be invited up to the altar to receive God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness applied to each of us. In the Lord's Supper we receive the bread and wine given as Christ's very Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Even those who come up simply to receive a blessing are being given the sure Word of God; the promise and assurance that through Christ you are forgiven. In Him, you have the sure promise of redemption from death and eternal life in the world to come.

This Gospel of peace applied to us here in this service is for sharing with all people, every day, in your lives. It is to be shared in word and in deed. It is to be applied to those who call you friend and to those who see you as their enemy. May God prune each of us so that we would produce His good fruit more abundantly in our lives. Through each of us, may all people taste and see that the LORD is Good. Through Jesus Christ, the true vine. Amen.

Please pray with me.

God of healing, great Vinedresser of Your people, forgive us and remove from us all our wild and bitter fruit. Keep us connected to Christ, the true vine, so that we might grow into His fullness and produce the fruit of justice, mercy, and peace that You desire to see in our lives. When we set ourselves against You and Your will, correct us gently with Your Law and restore us to You through the Gospel of Christ. May those who know us, come to know You through the fruitful lives we live. Guard us from Satan, our true enemy, and teach us Your ways so that all who see us as enemies may come to faith in Christ through our lives of witness and mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Children's Message

Title: Pride
Corresponds with: Bringing the Fruit of His Steadfast Love
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 3 - Pride
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

Does your family have a garden? My family had one when we were growing up. In it we planted many things: tomatoes, green beans, zucchini, peppers, squash, and cucumbers. It was always fun to help my parents pick the vegetables when they were ripe, and usually it was very delicious when we got to eat the foods from the garden. But the cucumbers would give us trouble sometimes. They looked nice and ripe and delicious, but when you took a bite, your mouth would turn so bitter and gross!

In the life of a Christian, our actions are like the vegetables that grew in my family's garden. Instead of watering and planting, God provides us with what we need to grow in our bodies and grow in our faith! He gives us the Bible so we can know more about Him, he listens to us when we talk to Him, and He even gives us the Holy Spirit when we are baptized! God has done all that good work, being like the gardener of our lives. But do we always produce good, tasty vegetables? Loving, caring, truthful actions? No.

One particularly bad thing that can grow out of the garden of any Christian is pride. Do you know what pride is? Pride is thinking you are better than others and that you know more than God.

We hear about pride from each of our Bible readings for today. The Old Testament lesson talks about how God's people turned away from Him and His ways and chose to do things on their own. In the Gospel lesson, the leaders of the church were ignoring God's call to love and serve His people, and were loving and serving themselves instead. And in our Epistle lesson Paul talks about how he has to avoid pride in His life because he knows no matter how good he may seem, without God in his life he is nothing.

In our world today, pride is all around us. We do and say what we think is right, forgetting to look to God and let Him decide what is right and wrong. We might be more focused on being popular or fitting in with our friends that we choose to do things the easy way instead of the godly way. Let me remind you that TODAY God is calling you to have loving actions growing out of your garden. Caring for people who are different from you, being brave to speak God's truth found in the Bible instead of going along with what others say, being humble enough to admit when you are wrong and ask God and others for forgiveness.

Let's pray about this now. Repeat after me:

Dear God // You have worked in me // to know you better // and do actions // that glorify you. // I want others // to know your truth // and your love. // Use me God // and help me // with your Holy Spirit. // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: **Bringing the Fruit of His Steadfast Love**
Author: **Megan Schultz**
Video: **Children's Message Video 3 - Pride**
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. How does pride grow into racism and other prejudices?
2. Ephesians 6:12 says, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* Discuss enemies you may have in your life and how Satan is the true cause behind them.
3. How should the knowledge that Satan is our true enemy change the way we treat people who we view as our enemies? What knowledge can you seek to gain about someone you view as your enemy?
4. The sermon reminds us that *“God chose us to reveal His will and salvation to a world in need.”* What do you think the world needs to hear most right now? Choose a Bible verse to memorize as a family and be prepared to share it when God gives you an opportunity on social media, at school, or at work.
5. What does the world need to see right now? How can your family live justly, show mercy, or act humbly? Challenge each other to choose something to complete in the next week.
6. How can standing up for God's truth cause you to be hated or looked down on? Where has God's truth convicted you of wrong thinking or wrong actions in your life?
7. The sermon reminds us that we represent God in the way we live our lives. Think of someone you don't get along with. What can you change in your interactions with this person so they still experience the goodness of God through you?
8. Explain the process of pruning plants. What do you need God to “prune” or remove from your life so you can produce “good fruit” and live in a godly way?

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Dear Jesus, when you were on earth, you had every reason to live pridefully. You are perfect! You are God and man! But you chose to live humbly, serving others and dying on the cross to take away my sin. I am prideful. I prefer my way over Your way. I defend myself and my actions, even when I am wrong. I take offense and place barriers between myself and others instead of loving and caring for them. Help me to be more like you. Work in me through Your Holy Spirit to grow good fruits in my life and glorify You in what I say and do. I know that You hear me, God. I know You will “create in me a clean heart.” Thank You for the blessings of these people around me. Use us to spread the joy of Your Gospel and the light of Your truth. Amen.

Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 4

Outline

Title: We Are One in Christ

Text: Philippians 4:4–13, Epistle lesson for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A

Author: Rev. R. Gabriel Kasper

Goal: That the hearers are content to live as one in Christ with people of all races.

- I. A misunderstood verse. Philippians 4:13. *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”*
 - A. Examples:
 1. I can do all sports through Him who gives me strength.
 2. Tim Tebow - I can make touchdowns through Him who gives me strength.
 - B. What is the text about?
What we believe about ultimate reality shapes our community, conviction, and contentment.
- II. Background to the text.
 - A. Paul’s letter to the Philippians was the most personal of all of his letters to the churches.
 1. It is a church that Paul started. You can read about it in Acts 16.
 2. God uses Paul to share the Gospel with a woman, a slave, and a gentile.
What’s the big deal. Prior to his conversion, Paul was a Pharisee. Pharisees saw women, slaves, and gentiles as necessary evils best to be avoided when possible.
 3. Paul shifted from praying everyday, “God, thank you that I’m not like these people,” to starting a church made up exclusively of “these people?!”
 - a. It was Paul’s encounter with Jesus, his reception of the Gospel message.
 - b. When you encounter the resurrected Jesus, when you receive the Gospel:
 - i. It fundamentally shifts how you view other people.
 - ii. It fundamentally shifts who’s allowed in your community.
- III. This is how what you believe about ultimate reality shapes your community:
 - A. Community with God.
 1. To believe the Gospel means I believe that my fellowship with God has nothing to do with my moral performance.
 2. I get to enjoy fellowship with God purely because of God’s grace poured out for me in Jesus Christ.
 - B. Community with others.
 1. Not based on external similarities.
 2. Based on God’s grace given to me and to all people.
 - C. It is our failure to live out the reality of the Gospel that contributes to racial division amongst people. If I don’t believe that ultimately I am made right with God purely by his grace in Christ, then I will inevitably seek my righteousness and acceptance in something else, often times my race or ethnic identity.
“They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger ... they fix upon their race, their membership in a party ... and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ.” - Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*.
 - D. Our failure amid the cries for racial justice.
 1. On the one hand, I hear some Christians (mostly white) get very defensive, deny the magnitude of the problem of racism in our society.
 2. On the other hand, I hear folks who are (rightly!) speaking about the pervasiveness of racism in

our society, but doing it in such a way that they shame and degrade their brothers and sisters in Christ.

- E. The Gospel frees us:
 - 1. To not get defensive, but instead to acknowledge, confront, and repent of the sin of racism in our own lives and in our society.
 - 2. To do this in a spirit of love.
- F. The Gospel says that we are one in Christ.
 - 1. The Gospel says that God brought us into fellowship with Him by no merit of our own but purely by His grace in Christ.
 - 2. And we're meant to show that grace to one another and offer the world a vision of a new kind of community, one united by Christ.

IV. But, we're not just a community, we're a community with convictions.

- A. Look with me at verse 10 in our text: *"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity."*
- B. Paul is writing this letter to thank the Philippians. See, Paul is in prison in Rome. And in the Roman prison system they didn't really feed you or clothe you, so the only way you ate or had clothes was if people brought them and gave them to you.
 - 1. And these Philippian Christians did exactly that for Paul. They sent someone upwards of 1,200 miles from Philippi to Rome with a "prison care package" for Paul.
 - 2. So, this is what he's referencing in verse 10 here. He's saying, hey I rejoiced that you showed your concern for me.
- C. Now, this begs a couple questions:
 - 1. Why would the Philippians take the incredible risk of sending one of their own on a long and most definitely dangerous journey in order to bring Paul supplies?
 - 2. Why is Paul in prison in the first place?
 - 3. And the answer to both of these questions is the same ... they believe the same ultimate reality and that shapes their convictions.
 - a. The whole reason Paul is in prison is because he's viewed as an enemy of the state because he proclaims that Jesus is Lord instead of Caesar.
 - b. And the whole reason the Philippians sent Paul this gift is because they believe that Jesus is Lord.
- D. Have you ever seen what a group of people who share the same convictions and beliefs do when one of their own faces adversity?
 - 1. They don't back away but they actually get bolder in their convictions.

On April 12th, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and put in jail for his civil rights protests in Birmingham. The Civil Rights Movement didn't stop; it was thrust forward. People were emboldened by Martin Luther King's arrest. That led to the August 28th, 1963 historic "March on Washington," and the speech *"I have a dream."*
 - 2. May we share that same conviction that Paul, the Philippians, and Rev. Martin Luther King had!
 - 3. It's interesting to see Dr. King's comments on this in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. He writes, *There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.*
 - 4. What we believe about ultimate reality will shape our convictions.

- a. Confessing Jesus as Lord with our mouth, but failing to confess it with our lives.
- b. Instead of Jesus being Lord, we let our politics, our social media feed, and our comfort be Lord.
- c. Turn away from those idols; live in light of the reality that Jesus is Lord, and because of that seek to rectify the deep racial disparities in our society.
- d. May the Lordship of Jesus enable us to pursue a church, a city, a country, and world in which ethnic and racial differences are celebrated as reflections of the image of God. Where the color of someone's skin doesn't (in large part) determine their lot in life.
- e. May the Lordship of Jesus enable us to lower our defensiveness. To be honest about the racial divisions in our society and in our own lives, and seek to live into the reality that we are one in Christ with our brothers and sisters of all races.

V. May we live with that conviction. And finally, may we live with contentment.

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

- A. The secret to finding true contentment is looking at where you are drawing your strength from.
 - 1. Paul says he's got the answer, vs. 13, *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*
 - 2. Paul can face anything, because Christ is strengthening him. Paul can be content in any circumstance because Christ is strengthening him.
- B. And from that place of contentment in the Gospel, we can celebrate the reality that we are one in Christ. **Illustration:** Rally at Ann Arbor. Keshia Thomas protected a clansman. *"When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down."*
- C. May you look to Christ on the cross and see that in Him you are united to brothers and sisters of all races and may that lead you to live with conviction and contentment.

Sermon

Title: We Are One in Christ
Text: Philippians 4:4–13, Epistle lesson for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A
Author: Rev. R. Gabriel Kasper

Goal: That the hearers are content to live as one in Christ with people of all races.

The last verse of our Epistle lesson for today has to be one of the most misinterpreted Bible passages of all time. Right? *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).*

For example...

When I was a young boy, I had a poster in my room. On this poster was a picture of a cartoon boy who was wearing and holding a ton of sports gear. He had both a football and bicycle helmet on, hockey pads, roller skates, cleats, he was holding a baseball bat and basketball in one hand and trapping a soccer ball underneath his right foot, and somehow he was able to hold onto a tennis racquet and golf club at the same time. And at the bottom of this poster it said, *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).*

The implication of course being that this cartoon boy can play every sport imaginable through Christ who strengthens him.

Friends, can I just tell you ... this is not at all what this text is about!

I find Tim Tebow as fascinating as the next guy, but he can write Philippians 4:13 under his eyes all he wants, this text still is not about scoring touchdowns, or not scoring touchdowns as the case may be. ☺

So, what is this text about!? And in what ways does it fit into our current series on racial healing?

Here is what we are going to see in our text: What we believe about ultimate reality shapes our community, conviction, and contentment. OK? That will be our outline today. What we believe about ultimate reality shapes our 1) community, 2) conviction, and 3) contentment.

Before we even get into our text for today, I think it's important we understand the context of the book of Philippians.

See, the book of Philippians is actually a letter written to the church in the ancient city of Philippi. And this letter is written by the Apostle Paul, a leader in the early church. Now, we know that Paul wrote many letters to many churches, we have many of those letters in our Bible. But I would argue that the letter to the Philippians is the most personal.

And there's a couple of reasons for that.

First of all, this is a church that Paul started. You can read about it in Acts 16.

Paul shows up to the city of Philippi and starts sharing the Gospel with folks. And the first person to receive the Gospel is a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia. And then, like immediately after that, he casts a demon out of a slave girl, and then he and his companion Silas save the life of a suicidal Philippian jailer and end up baptizing his whole family. So, by the end of Acts 16, you've got a business woman, a slave girl, and a gentile jailer convert to Christianity. Boom. You got a church.

Now, the start of the Philippian church is certainly amazing, but I want us to focus in on how unique this community is, and how unique it is that God would use Paul specifically to start this church.

See, prior to his conversion to Christianity, Paul was a Pharisee, an elite group of Jewish leaders and scholars at this time in history. And every morning Pharisees had a prayer that they would pray that started like this, *“God I thank you that you did not make me a woman, a slave, or a gentile...”* Every morning Paul would pray, *“God, I thank you that you did not make me a woman, a slave, or a gentile.”*

But what happens in Philippi?! God uses Paul to share the Gospel with a woman ... a slave ... and a gentile. That's the start of this church exactly!

Now, what causes Paul to shift from praying every day, *"God, thank you that I'm not like these people,"* to starting a church made up exclusively of "these people?!"

Paul encounters the resurrected Jesus. Paul receives the Gospel.

See, when that happens, he can't stay the same. When you encounter the resurrected Jesus, when you put your faith in Him, when you receive the Gospel, it fundamentally shifts how you view other people. It fundamentally shifts who's allowed in your community.

This is how what you believe about ultimate reality shapes your community.

See, to believe the Gospel means I believe that my fellowship with God has nothing to do with my moral performance, it has nothing to do with the culture I come from, it has nothing to do with my ethnicity or my race. But I get to enjoy fellowship with God, purely because of God's grace poured out for me in Jesus Christ.

Because I believe that's true of ultimate reality, then I seek out fellowship with others not on the basis of their moral performance, not on the basis of their culture, not on the basis of their ethnicity or race, but I simply seek to extend the grace that God has given me and all people in Christ Jesus.

See, it is our failure to live out the reality of the Gospel that contributes to racial division amongst people. Because if I don't believe that ultimately I am made right with God purely by his grace in Christ, then I will inevitably seek my righteousness and acceptance in something else, often times in my race or ethnic identity.

Speaking of folks who don't live in light of the Gospel, Richard Lovelace puts it like this in his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*: *"They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger ... they fix upon their race, their membership in a party ... and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ."*

Friends, as we think about the cries for racial justice in our society right now, we see two responses from Christians that fail to live into the community created by the Gospel.

On the one hand, I hear some Christians (mostly white) get very defensive, deny the magnitude of the problem of racism in our society and charge almost anyone who speaks strongly against racism in the church as being overly "woke" or even a "marxist."

And on the other hand, I hear folks who are (rightly!) speaking about the pervasiveness of racism in our society, but doing it in such a way that they shame and degrade their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Friends, this is not the way of the Gospel. The Gospel frees us to not get defensive, but instead to acknowledge, confront, and repent of the sin of racism in our own lives and in our society. And the Gospel frees us to do this in a spirit of love.

The Gospel says that we are one in Christ. The Gospel says that God brought us into fellowship with Him by no merit of our own but purely by His grace in Christ.

And we're meant to show that grace to one another and offer the world a vision of a new kind of community—one united by Christ.

But we're not just a community, we're a community with convictions.

Look with me at verse 10 in our text: *"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity."*

Now, what's Paul talking about here? Well, the whole reason Paul is writing this letter is to thank the Philippians. See, Paul is in prison in Rome. And in the Roman prison system they didn't really feed you or clothe you, so the only way you ate or had clothes was if people brought them and gave them to you.

And these Philippian Christians did exactly that for Paul. They sent someone upwards of 1,200 miles from Philippi to Rome with a "prison care package" for Paul.

This is what he's referencing in verse 10 here. He's saying, "*Hey, I rejoiced that you showed your concern for me.*" He's saying, "*I know you cared about me in spirit, but now that you've given me this gift to sustain me in prison, I know you truly care about me.*"

Now, this begs a couple questions. Why would the Philippians take the incredible risk of sending one of their own on a long and most definitely dangerous journey in order to bring Paul supplies? And then secondly, why is Paul in prison in the first place?

And the answer to both of these questions is the same ... they believe the same ultimate reality, and that shapes their convictions.

Both Paul and these Philippian Christians believe that the fundamental truth behind everything is that Jesus is Lord, and that shapes their convictions.

The whole reason Paul is in prison is because he's viewed as an enemy of the state because he proclaims that Jesus is Lord instead of Caesar. And the whole reason the Philippians sent Paul this gift is because they believe that Jesus is Lord, and they want Paul to continue to share that message even in the face of adversity.

They are convicted. And this adversity actually pushes them forward in their conviction.

Now, that may sound backwards, but let's think about it for a second. Have you ever seen what a group of people who share the same convictions and beliefs do when one of their own faces adversity?

They don't back away but they actually get bolder in their convictions. Right?

On April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and put in jail for his civil rights protests in Birmingham. Did the Civil Rights Movement slow down when he was arrested? Did it stop? No. It was thrust forward. People were emboldened by Martin Luther King's arrest.

So much so that it led to the August 28, 1963 historic "March on Washington," in which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a little speech you may have heard of, called "*I have a dream.*"

When people have shared convictions and beliefs, adversity doesn't slow them down; it actually thrusts them forward. Brothers and Sisters, may we share that same conviction that Paul, the Philippians, and Rev. Martin Luther King had! The conviction that Jesus is Lord and that that actually means something!

It's interesting to hear Dr. King's comments on this in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

He writes, "*There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven,” called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.*"

See friends, what we believe about ultimate reality will shape our convictions. And so often I fear that you, me, the Church itself confesses Jesus as Lord with our mouths but fail to confess it with our lives.

Instead of Jesus being Lord, we let our politics be Lord, our social media feed be Lord, and perhaps above all, our comfort be Lord.

May we turn away from those idols and instead live in light of the reality that Jesus is Lord, and because of that seek to rectify the deep racial disparities in our society.

May the Lordship of Jesus enable us to pursue a church, a city, a country, and world in which ethnic and racial differences are celebrated as reflections of the image of God. Where the color of someone's skin doesn't (in large part) determine their lot in life.

May the lordship of Jesus enable us to lower our defensiveness, to be honest about the racial divisions in our society and in our own lives, and to seek to live into the reality that we are one in Christ with our brothers and sisters of all races.

May we live with that conviction. And finally, may we live with contentment.

Look with me at verses 11–12 in our text. *“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”*

Alright, so notice this: Paul says he has learned the secret of contentment. Remember he's writing this from a prison cell. He says, it doesn't matter. I can be wealthy, I can be poor, I can be hungry, I can be full. Doesn't matter. In any and every circumstance, I am content.

No. Matter. What. Paul says, *“I am content.”*

Can you say the same thing? Are you content? Always in a state of satisfaction? Or are you always yearning for more, more, more?

More money, more toys, more time, more promotions, more acceptance, more relationships, more recognition, more status, more success, more love, more whatever, more, more, more.

Is it ever enough? Are we ever at a perfectly balanced time in life? When we finally get that “one thing” we need to be satisfied, to be content, are we actually content? No.

So, what's the secret? How do we live in a state of satisfaction and contentment regardless of circumstance?

Paul says he's got the answer, verse 13: *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”*

Paul can face anything, because Christ is **strengthening** him. Paul can be content in any circumstance because Christ is **strengthening** him.

So the secret to finding true contentment is looking at where you are drawing your strength from.

Paul says the secret to contentment is being strengthened by Christ. So, if you're not content, you should ask, *“Where am I drawing my strength from?”*

See, the temptation is for us to draw strength from ourselves, or from others, or from our circumstances. Right? If I can be strong enough internally then I'll be content. If I have the right people supporting me then I'll be content. If things are going my way, then I'll be content.

But, of course, we all know the reality is that none of us is strong enough internally all the time, people will let us down, and my goodness if 2020 has taught us anything, it's that our circumstances are almost never ideal.

So we have to draw our strength from something outside ourselves, our social circle, and our circumstances.

We have to draw strength from Christ.

Now, that sounds all well and good, but how does that actually work?

It works when I recognize that the biggest problem in my life has already been solved. See, the biggest problem in my life, your life, and our world is that, left to our own devices, we are hopelessly lost in our sin. Turned in ourselves and turned away from the love of God.

But God in His grace sent Jesus to take on your sin and the sin of the world and nail it to the cross. And because of Jesus' death and resurrection, you are forgiven, you are set free, you are welcomed into a restored relationship with the Father for now and all of eternity.

When you see that the biggest problem in your life is already taken care of, you can draw strength from that reality, you can rest in that grace, and you can find contentment.

And from that place of contentment in the Gospel, we can celebrate the reality that we are one in Christ.

Some of you will remember this: In 1996, a branch of the Ku Klux Klan decided to hold a rally in Ann Arbor. Of course, as Ann Arbor residents heard about this, a counter protest formed to tell the KKK that they were not welcome. The scene was tense as the two sides stood across from one another.

Then suddenly, a woman with a megaphone from the counter protest shouted, "There's a Klansman in the crowd." Sure enough, in the middle of this crowd of people protesting racism there was a white man wearing a confederate flag T-shirt and a large Nazi SS tattoo on his arm.

The crowd chased after him, knocked him to the ground, began kicking him and hitting him with sticks, amidst shouts of "kill the Nazi."

In the midst of that, 18-year-old Keshia Thomas threw herself on top of this man's body to shield him from the blows of the mob. Incredible. A black teenage girl laid her life on the line to protect a man who hated her just because of the color of her skin.

Where does that come from? Well, in interviews that followed, Keshia Thomas cited her Christian faith and said, "*When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down.*"

See, Keshia's view of ultimate reality is shaped by the Gospel. By her Savior who laid down his life to save her. Because of that, her view of community and conviction was shaped so she was present to speak out against racism and hatred in society. *And* her view of ultimate reality gave her the contentment to give of herself even for the sake of one who would be her enemy.

Friends, may you look to Christ on the cross and see that in him you are united to brothers and sisters of all races, and may that lead you to live with conviction and contentment.

Let's pray ...

Amen.

Bible References are from the ESV.

Children's Message

Title: Comparison
Corresponds with: We Are One in Christ
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 4 - Comparison
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

Do you ever compare yourself to other people? Maybe you think... She has a pretty new dress and I just have this old one, he keeps hitting home runs and I can't even hit the ball, her hair is so shiny and straight and mine is curly and crazy, the teacher always likes them better than me, I always get in trouble and they never get caught! This happens alllllll the time, not just to kids, but to grown-ups too! We think that what we have or what we are isn't good enough. Maybe some people tell you that, or you might have said something like that to someone else.

In our Bible reading today, a man named Paul talks about what it means to be content. Do you know what content means? It means being happy with what you have. You might think, yeah okay, it's easy to be content when everything is good. That's true, but listen to what Paul writes: *"For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:11b-13). Everything was not going great in Paul's life—he was actually writing this from jail! He had been put in jail just for saying that Jesus is the Lord. Paul's life was definitely not fair, but he was still able to be happy and not complaining. God gave him the strength to be in jail but still give thanks to God. Paul never lost his faith in God and eventually God performed a miracle and let Paul out of jail!

Our life might not be hard as Paul's, but God still gives you opportunities to trust Him and His plan and be content. You can ask God to help you be thankful that you have clothes to wear, enjoy playing sports even if you're not the best, love the beautiful body that God has created for you, try to be a loving and respectful student or son/daughter no matter what other people are doing. God can even change our hearts through the Holy Spirit and give us words to help others be content. We can remind them that God is with them in their lives, God loves them, God is fighting for them and working things out for their good.

Let's pray about this. Repeat after me:

Dear God, // Help me to trust // Your plans and Your way. // I want to be happy // with what you have given me // and help others // to know Your truth. // In Jesus' name, // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: We Are One in Christ
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 4 - Comparison
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. What is one thing God has strengthened you to do today?
2. Where are you intentionally seeking out fellowship with others to extend the grace God has given? If this is not something you care currently doing, where might God be leading you to do this as a family?
3. The sermon shared that the correct response of a Christian toward the sin of racism is to acknowledge, confront, and repent. Practice doing this as a family with a current example, and work toward making it a regular family practice.
4. The Philippians had so much concern for Paul that it led them to care for his spirit and also led them to give gifts to sustain his life. Where do you have the opportunity to do this for others?
5. When have you experienced adversity in your family that caused you to bond more tightly together and care for each other more deeply?
6. What is a cause you would love to see addressed by your church? How might God be moving you to lead that charge?
7. What things tend to replace God as Lord over your life? (In other words, what leads your decision making and defines your success?)
8. In the story told about Keshia Thomas, she loved her enemy in two ways: She proclaimed God's truth to him by participating in the protest against the ungodly KKK group, and protected his life. How is God calling you to love your enemy?

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Dear God, Thank you for sharing the secret to contentment with us: doing all things in Your strength. Forgive us for attempting to do things out of our own strength, in our own way, and for our own glory. Continue to work in our hearts through Your Spirit and cause Your love to overflow into every area of our life. May love for You and others guide our words and actions. Use us as agents of peace and unity in our broken world. Make us bold to speak and act against the powers of evil in our society. We pray, "Your kingdom come," Lord. Help us to do this. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 5

Outline

Title: Healing for Deep Afflictions

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10, Epistle lesson for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A

Author: Rev. Richard Robinson

As Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica, he begins by thanking God for their “*work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in Jesus.*” Then he proceeds to encourage them by saying, “*for you received the word in much affliction ...*”

I. Affliction

A. The Word of God has always been received with much affliction.

1. Noah (Gen. 6:13 and 18)
2. Abram (Gen. 12:1–2)
3. Moses (Exo. 6:1)
4. Jesus (Luke 9:22)
5. Saul (Acts 8:3–4)

B. You have had much to endure these days.

1. COVID-19
2. Many have lost jobs because of it
3. Lost opportunities for education

C. The larger implications of afflictions:

1. What about those who have not been able to withstand their affliction?
2. What about those who are simply overcome by their afflictions?

II. The ugly reality of the race problem in this country

A. As powerful as the election of a black president was, that was not the end of an era.

B. We thought that now that we have a black president, we are entering a post-racial time.

C. What we really did was let our guard down and Satan caught us sleeping.

1 Peter 5:8 tells us to “*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around looking for some one to devour.*”

D. We did not outrun the elephant or bury it or make it disappear.

III. What can we do?

A. We must realize, “*This IS an elephant! It is going to take a long time to eat.*”

B. We cannot eat this elephant alone.

C. We need to share each other’s affliction.

IV. This problem is too big for us. But it is not too big for God.

A. Acknowledge that Paul is acknowledging YOU. Then practice doing that for someone else.

B. If God can work the power of His Word in reaching you through affliction, He can do the same in someone else.

C. If you can accept the shared affliction, you can begin a dialogue with someone different than you.

Sermon

Title: Healing for Deep Afflictions
Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10, Epistle lesson for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Series A
Author: Rev. Richard Robinson

The text for this 20th Sunday after Pentecost is taken from 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10, specifically verse 6.

As Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica, he begins by thanking God for their “*work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in Jesus.*” Then he proceeds to encourage them by saying, “*for you received the word in much affliction...*”

The Word of God has always been received with much affliction. God’s word came to Noah as He destroys the earth. “***So God said to Noah, ‘I am going to put an end to all people ... But I will establish my covenant with you’***” (Genesis 6:13 and 18). Abram was blessed in the covenant with God, only after “***The Lord had said to him, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation’***” (Genesis 12:1–2). The establishing of the first Passover was in the middle of the enslavement of the Hebrew people, just after the 10 plagues: “***Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country’***” (Exodus 6:1). In the middle of the Roman occupation, God sends the Word Himself to die on the cross for the salvation of all mankind: “***The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priest and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life***” (Luke 9:22). The persecution of the early church is the backdrop for God moving His Word out from Jerusalem, into all the world. “***But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went***” (Acts 8:3–4). The Word of God has always been received with much affliction.

So, Paul is here encouraging the early church at Thessalonica to stand against the afflictions from inside and outside the Jewish community. It was not easy to be a follower of Jesus, then as now. Paul encourages you with these same words, to continue to receive the Word with much affliction. And in the world of today, in our country, we are enduring much affliction. When affliction is experienced, endurance is necessary.

You have had much to endure these days. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on our nation. You may know someone who has contacted the virus or lost someone to the virus. There have also been many unintended consequences that you have had to endure. Many have lost jobs because of it, lost opportunities for education, lost friends or friendships, not to mention disruptions of your own church gatherings. Yet you come here to church, in whatever form that takes, to receive the Word, in spite of much affliction.

What about those who have also received the Word, but in a different set of afflictions? A daughter’s mom is in a nursing home, not the best. Mom catches the virus, is admitted to the hospital, placed on a ventilator, dies. Then the mother is buried without the daughter ever seeing her mom. Young people gather for a large spring party. A few contract the disease, one is hospitalized, survives but with permanent lung damage. State trooper, just out of the Academy, contracts COVID-19 on duty, dies leaving family and co-workers stunned. Shut-in veteran with no family dies alone in his home but is not discovered for weeks.

And what about those who have not been able to withstand their affliction? The goal of all is to withstand the affliction and continue. But what about those who cannot withstand the affliction and have given up? I hear things like, “*Why did God take my friends and abandoned me like this? I can’t trust Him anymore. I’m outta here!*”

What about those who are simply overcome by their afflictions? “*We just lost contact and the next thing I know, I’m hearing she has killed herself.*” Or “*We’ve been friends for 15 years. Lately he has become so angry. Then last week I see him on the news being arrested for beating someone, badly. And because of this virus, they won’t let me see him.*”

We all can identify with someone who has gone through affliction and withstood to the end. We can admire the mother who has lost her son to COVID-19 but holds her head high and keeps the faith. But what about the mother who has lost her son to police violence?

Ok, I have beaten around this bush and ignored the elephant in the room long enough. What this Coronavirus has really

done is expose the elephant. We have a race problem in this country, especially with black and brown people. We cannot deny it, run from it, disguise it, or bury it. Many of us are afraid of what could happen if we let that racism cat out of the bag. We may find ourselves fighting, as a country, against each other, again.

And as powerful as the election of a black president was, that was not the end of an era. That was the elephant being exposed, again. We should have seen this coming. We thought, *“Now that we have a black president, we are entering a post-racial time.”* We made that race elephant disappear right in front of our own eyes. Or so we thought. What we really did was let our guard down and Satan caught us sleeping. Peter warned us of this. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us to *“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.”*

We did not outrun the elephant or bury it or make it disappear. The elephant lives. He is staring us right in the face. And each time, he comes back stronger than before. We must acknowledge this elephant. See him and admit he is still here. Only then can we do something about it.

But you say, *“What can I do? I am just one person. The problem is too big.”* Have you heard the old question, *“How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”* **First**, we must realize that this IS an elephant! It is going to take a long time to eat. This pandemic, like the elephant, is deep and wide and high. The sooner we admit this, the better we will be able to deal effectively with both.

This race elephant is so deep, it actually defines us as Americans. It came over here to this continent. It was part of our Revolutionary War and grew up with us like the wheat and the weed of Jesus’ parable (Matthew 13:24–30). This race elephant is wide and it affects the whole of America, in the South and North, Midwest, East Coast and West Coast, Prairie States, city and country, rural, urban, suburban. And it is high. It rises up into the highest forms of government, corporations, and people of power. This race elephant is BIG!

Second, we cannot eat this elephant alone. This elephant is OUR affliction. But we see our afflictions from different perspectives. What does an elephant look like to six (6) blind people? The elephant is a rope to the one who touches the tail, sword to one who touches the tusk, a tree trunk to the one who touches the leg, a fan to the one who touches the ear, a snake to one who touches the trunk, and a wall to the one who touches the side of the elephant. They are all right for their viewpoint, but only together can they see the whole of the elephant.

We can only understand this race elephant if we look at it together from all viewpoints. When we see the church as a human body, we see different parts doing different jobs, working for same body. We are going to need each other to even see this whole race/elephant. Only then can we deal with it.

Third, we need to share each other’s affliction. Hearing about another’s afflictions can help us see ours differently. Telling others about our afflictions may help them deal with theirs differently. Sharing as a group will let us see how this race elephant affects us a whole. Then, together, we can find a way to defeat him.

This problem is too big for us. But it is not too big for God. Do not let this race elephant overwhelm you. Go back to Paul. Read his words as though he is speaking to you. Paul is thanking God for YOU, for YOUR work of faith, for YOUR labor of love, for YOUR steadfastness of hope in Jesus. Acknowledge that Paul is acknowledging YOU. Then practice doing that for someone else.

Hear Paul speak these words to you: *“for you received the word in much affliction.”* Then think about how that affliction may be as someone else is receiving God’s Word in their lives, and even in the life of one not like you. If God can work the power of His Word in reaching you through affliction, He can do the same in someone else. If you can accept the shared affliction, you can begin a dialogue with someone different than you.

Pray for God to bring one person into your life. Start a conversation about your afflictions. That conversation may be hard, but heart issues are hard issues. This is not the whole race/elephant, but it’s a start. Settle in for the work ahead. And know that God *“who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of our Lord, Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6).

AMEN

Bible references are from the ESV and NIV.

Children's Message

Title: Suffering
Corresponds with: Healing for Deep Affliction
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 5 - Suffering
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

Hey kids, today we are hearing from Paul again. Paul was writing to people who lived in the city called Thessalonica. These people had just become Christians because Paul was a missionary and part of his job was to tell people about God.

The people that Paul was writing to were actually suffering because people who lived around them, who weren't Christians, were making it really hard for them to live their lives for God. They were making it hard for them to meet together and have church with other Christians. They even made it illegal for them to tell other people about God. If you did that, you could be put in jail or sometimes even be killed.

These people were suffering, they were scared. They were worried for their lives. Some of them were hurt because of following Jesus. You might think, "Well, my life isn't like that. I'm able to go to church or watch church from home. I can pray and meet with other Christians. My life isn't like that." Even if you are not suffering right now, people all around us are. We just had the Coronavirus pandemic and many people suffered and died. We also have Black and Brown people in our neighborhoods being treated differently because of the color of their skin.

When we see this happening, we might feel angry. "Why is this happening to them? It's not fair." You may be questioning God, "Why are you allowing this? You might be thinking, God, are you really in control? Because if you are then why are you letting this happen?"

Let's see how the Thessalonians responded when they were suffering. I'm going to read to you from God's 100% true Word, the Bible, from 1 Thessalonians 1:6. It says, "*in spite of all of your suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*" The message that Paul is talking about in that verse is God's Word, the Bible. The message is that Jesus loves us; He loves everyone equally. That is the message they had so much joy to hear; it is the words that we get to hear at church and whenever we read the Bible.

When the people heard God's Word, they turned to Him in their suffering, even though they were going through real things, really hard suffering that they knew they couldn't get rid of on their own. We also are suffering today with sin, which is the bad things that we do. We see the effects, the things that happen because of sin like suffering from Coronavirus or suffering with racism—people being treated badly because of the color of their skin. We can't get rid of this on our own power.

God knew that sin would cause us to suffer and make our lives hard. So, he sent Jesus to die on the cross so that our sins wouldn't cause us to suffer forever in hell with the devil. When we get to believe in Jesus we will go to heaven with God, where there is no suffering, no sadness, no racism, no Coronavirus. We get to live with Him forever in heaven. We know Jesus has defeated Satan and is with us, right now, to help us get through the sufferings that we have on earth while we're living here.

You can ask your parents to help you turn to Jesus in prayer when you see the suffering or you experience suffering in your own mind. And if you have other Christians in your life, like Christian friends and uncles, grandparents, they can help you and remind you that God is with you in your suffering. He doesn't leave us alone. He's in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. We have His Word to remind us of what He says for our whole life.

Maybe you can do that for someone you know that is suffering. You could read them a Bible verse, or just remind them that God is with them, and you can pray for them. There's a lot of suffering around us, just like with the Thessalonians, and just like them, we welcome the Word of God in church and at home with our families through the joy of the Holy Spirit.

So let's pray now and talk to God about this. Please fold your hands and repeat after me:

Dear God // you see my trouble // and the trouble // in our world // thank you // for not leaving me alone // but giving me // Your Word // and your Holy Spirit. // Help me // to turn to you // with all my troubles // in Jesus' name // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: **Healing for Deep Affliction**
Author: **Megan Schultz**
Video: **Children’s Message Video 5 - Suffering**
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. When has someone shared the Word of God with you when you were hurting or sad? Who could you share the Word of God with who is suffering in your life?
2. How has COVID-19 impacted your family?
3. The sermon told us about a person who had been suffering and said “Why did God take my friends and abandon me like this? I can’t trust Him anymore. I’m outta here!” What would you tell this man about God to comfort him?
4. In the sermon, Pastor compared the problem of racism to an “elephant in the room.” What does acknowledging the elephant of racism look like at school? At church? At work? On social media?
5. After we acknowledge the elephant of racism for ourselves, we are to look at its impact on others. Are you seeking out different perspectives on race? In conversations with others, books, videos?
6. What are some of your current afflictions or hard things you are dealing with in your life? Share these as a group and pray for one another.
7. Get out your Bible and read through 1 Thessalonians 1:2–4. Each time, replace the word “you” with the name of one family member included in this conversation. Use this as a reminder that God is working through us and sees all that we do for Him!

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Dear God, our world is afflicted. We see the effects of sin in our home, our community, and our world. When you came to this earth as a man, you saw it too. Thank you for living the perfect life I am unable to live. Thank you for taking the weight of my sin on yourself and dying on the cross to get rid of it forever. Help me to live each day in the joy of knowing that I am part of your family. Work through me to glorify you even through my struggles. Use me to turn other people to your truth and comfort when they are struggling with sin. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 6

Outline

Title: It Just Takes One Word – No One is Left Out

Text: Revelation 14:6–7, 1st lesson for the Festival of the Reformation - Observed, Series A

Author: Rev. Harold Avers

Text: Revelation 14:6–7 *“Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal Gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.’”*

Introduction:

John 8:34, where Jesus says, *“Truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”*

From the familiar Reformation hymn **“A Mighty Fortress”** come these words in stanza 3:

Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpow’r us.
This world’s prince may still scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none. He’s judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him!

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I. The eternal Gospel is proclaimed!

A. One little word –

1. Let’s set the stage: There is the Lamb of God, standing on Mt. Zion
2. One little word – holy!
3. One little word – glory! The way God created them to be, that’s how they were.

“For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father” (John 1:14).

4. Yes, the eternal Gospel of the glory of Jesus makes the eternal Gospel of the first angel true today and for eternity.

II. This eternal Gospel is for every person!

A. Let me ask you some questions:

1. Does God love you?
2. Do you love God?
3. Do you love all people?

B. Like when Peter said yes, Jesus says, *“Feed my sheep!”*

III. Remember the words from “A Mighty Fortress?” *“Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us!”*

A. Here is the hard issue: the devils all around us, that messes with our hearts.

1. Our nation, our church body, our district, our congregations—and yes, we in our hearts, struggle to accept the phrase “Black lives matter”
2. White folks and many black folks are more apt to say, “all lives matter.”
 - a. Consider Jesus as He taught in Luke 15 about the lost sheep. There are 100 sheep but one goes missing.
 - b. “One sheep matters!” One, out of many sheep, matters! In that way we are saying, “Black lives matter.”

- III. The eternal Gospel aims to have “glory to God!” complete—but ...
- A. Deciding to love others as we love ourselves is NOT OUR idea.
“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:17–18).
 - B. Who should make the first move?
 - C. Glory to God was—and is—not complete when people are not seen as being equal, or are not treated with equity.
Picture: three children trying to watch a baseball game through a fence: The fence is six feet tall. Each boy has the same size box to look over the fence, but they’re not all the same height. [Equity is giving each boy what he needs to see over the fence.]
- IV. No glory – judgment!
- A. Not loving our neighbor means that we do not love ourselves.
 - 1. Not loving our neighbor means that we do not love God with heart, soul and mind.
 - 2. Not loving God brings the judgment of God into the present.
 - B. What we can do about it?
 - 1. On this Reformation Sunday, instead of seeing what divides us—we see in each other the ONE Jesus who unites us.
 - 2. We learn how we can celebrate what God has done—and still will do—in making us one.

Conclusion: This learning is difficult.

Sermon

Title: It Just Takes One Word – No One is Left Out
Text: Revelation 14:6–7, 1st lesson for the Festival of the Reformation - Observed, Series A
Author: Rev. Harold Avers

Text: Revelation 14:6–7 *“Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal Gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.’”*

Introduction

Good morning! Isn't that a beautiful picture—proclaiming words that do what God intends? Telling not just the old story of Jesus and His love, but in words and actions doing what God gives us to do for every nation, tribe, language, and people? It's time! The angel warns us. Today the judgment of God examines what we do to celebrate God! It's time! The focus is clear for what He makes possible for us: *“Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”* What we do and how we do it either brings attention to us as the “doers,” or to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! It is God's will to accomplish His kingdom purpose in us.

How have we done? Not perfectly, right? And in terms of how we think of or treat black and brown citizens in our country, not great either, right? We say we love God, but we either fear or reject people of color. We are impacted by messages that divide us. We hope that the struggle will go away and we'll all be better “by and by.” The eternal Gospel joins people together in the one message of Good News. The eternal Gospel points to giving the same message to and for all peoples, tribes, languages, and nations.

We know our minds are in need of transformation. The message given even by the Church leads some to be confused. Today we are reminded in our Gospel account from John 8:34, where Jesus says, *“Truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”* Yes, we practice sin when we do not accept and speak well of our brothers and sisters who have a different skin color. Yes, there is prejudice in this world—and it starts with the way we discount Jesus by what we say and do ... or fail to say and do. Whatever gets in the way of God's Kingdom work in the way we think of black and white skin color in our nation—that's the question for this sermon series!

From the familiar Reformation hymn **“A Mighty Fortress”** come these words in stanza 3:

Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpow'r us.
This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him!

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I. The Eternal Gospel is Proclaimed!

One little word—that's what I want you to carry with you today. Oh, you will attach other words to it—but listen for how the phrase “one little word” can inform our faith walk on this Reformation Sunday. In the vision St. John is having by the power of God's Spirit in our text from Revelation, let's set the stage: There is the Lamb of God, standing on Mt. Zion, God's hill of life; 144,000 people with the Lamb AND with the Father's name on their foreheads; the sound like the roar of rushing waters (like Niagara Falls); a loud pealing of thunder ringing out, like many harps being played all at once—**and** they were singing a new song before the throne of God, the four living creatures, and the elders! Just think of it! What they sang no one else could learn. Why? They knew the song writer. You needed to know the song writer to sing this song. They knew for Whom they were singing. They were pure, keeping themselves from anyone who could lead them to lose their focus. In what they did, they followed the Lamb of God, because a price had been paid for them. They were, what one could say, one little word—**holy!** They did not lie or say half-truths. What they said, they did!

One little word—**glory!** The way God created them to be, that’s how they were. Glory—the way God created them to live—that’s how they lived. Glory—the way God treated them, that’s how they treated one another. Glory—giving God the firstfruits of themselves to the Father. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation, a congregation of many backgrounds of people and a living marketplace of opinions. He wrote to them, *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”* (2 Corinthians 4:6). Yes, we have the light shining where there is darkness. Yes, the knowledge of the glory of God is ours to share.

This eternal Gospel of giving glory to God is made possible in the Living Word, of whom John writes, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father”* (John 1:14). Yes, the eternal Gospel of the glory of Jesus makes the eternal Gospel of the first angel true today and for eternity.

II. This Eternal Gospel is for Every Person!

Now we come to what should seem easy. Let me ask you some questions: Does God love you? Yes! That’s easy! Do you love God? Hopefully you say yes! That’s easy! Do you love all people? Like Peter who answered Jesus’ question, *“Peter, do you love me?”* we say, “Yes!” And that’s easy. And then Jesus says, *“Feed my sheep!”* And then we ask, Who is to give glory to God? All people, right?! Who can be made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ? All people, right?! Who is present in the beginning, in the present, and in the future—the same? Jesus Christ, right? *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”* (Hebrews 13:8). Who is the same in giving glory to God? All people, right?!

Remember the words from **A Mighty Fortress?** *“Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us!”* The general theme of this sermon series is “Heart Issues are Hard Issues!” There are hard issues of our hearts working to devour us as a country, even bringing division in the church of Jesus Christ.

Here is the hard issue, the devils all around us that mess with our hearts: Our nation, our church body, our district, our congregations—and yes, we in our hearts, struggle to accept the phrase “Black lives matter” because we are thinking about the name of the group and everything we’ve heard said and done by some in the group. The message is lost because we believe what some **do** in the name of BLM as the message itself. Because of that we don’t want to be uncomfortable. White folks and many black folks are more apt to say, “all lives matter.” It sounds more in tune with the truth we Christians believe, that God loves all people. The question comes to us, “How can black lives matter more than any other lives?” Here’s what happens in our minds. Let me try to explain it this way: Consider Jesus as He taught in Luke 15 about the lost sheep. There are 100 sheep but one goes missing. Jesus leaves the 99 and goes after the one. He said, *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”* [Luke 19:10]. I don’t remember ever thinking, “What about the 99? Didn’t they count?” Of course they count, but they are not the ones in danger of being left out. The one sheep not seen as a part of the fold is in danger. “One sheep matters!” One, out of many sheep, matters! In that way we are saying, “Black lives matter.”

III. The Eternal Gospel Aims to have “Glory to God!” Complete – BUT ...

Deciding to love others as we love ourselves is NOT OUR idea. It is a command, an expectation, a teaching that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, had from the beginning. God instructed Moses and the people of Israel, *“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord”* (Leviticus 19:17–18).

Who should make the first move? In the Bible study *One Nation Under God: Healing Racial Divides in America*, by Rev. Haney, session 5, *“What Can I Do?”* the division between black and white in our society and in our churches too often tries to get solved by taking sides and proving the other wrong. Let me tell you from experience: in Detroit, in the late seventies and mid-eighties, working with LCMS congregations to develop black lay leadership was not popular among white pastors. Not all black congregation leaders imagined change would happen. The uncertainty of who would have to give in and lose became evident. The fear of not wanting to offend the other was obvious. The desire to have quick fixes like having a black pastor to reach more black people to join the church was tempting; and wondering if the Michigan District would come in and give us help or stop what we were trying to do was always present. Yes, there was that fear of those with the power; yes, there was fear of not being good enough; yes, there was that fear of “what would people say?”

Glory to God was—and is—not complete when people are not seen as being equal, or are not treated with equity. Picture three children trying to watch a baseball game through a fence: The fence is six feet tall. Each boy has the same size box to look over the fence. The tall boy stands on the box and can see over the fence. The next boy is not as tall, stands on the box, and on his tiptoes can just see over the fence. The short boy stands on the box, but even on his tiptoes can only see the fence. Equality is giving each boy the same sized box. Equity is giving each boy what he needs to see over the fence. The preamble to the Declaration of Independence says, “All men are created equal,” right? But when we decide who is worthy in our minds of being treated with equity in opportunities and protections with justice, we have not only **denied** that we are equal, but we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

IV. No Glory – Judgment!

Not loving our neighbor means that we do not love ourselves. Not loving our neighbor means that we do not love God with heart, soul, and mind. Not loving God brings the judgment of God into the present. Not loving God shows that “glory to God” is not clear in our message. If the message given is about us, about our congregation, about what we stand for, about what we make most important—and does not draw people to the eternal Gospel that sets us free to give glory to God, then there is work to do. Considering people—what they are allowed to do, what they can say to us, what they need to do—based on the color of skin is a sin. What is the message we give? What does God’s eternal Gospel empower us to change?

What we can do about it is today’s Bible Study challenge in Session 5. Let me be personal here. I, who have written this sermon, am white. All the ministry God gave me to do was in the majority black community. I failed so many times. I messed up. I said uncaring things. I said to myself, and to people of color with whom I lived and worked, *“I want you to know something that I must keep up front in my mind. I know that I can leave the struggle of my learning what it means to be white. I can go back home to blend in with people who discount you. That’s my position of privilege. I can avoid my failings and walk away. That’s my position of privilege. I don’t need to keep learning how you put up with my misunderstandings and mistreatment I and people who look like me bring against you in our country. That’s my position of privilege. Yet I know that I depend on you for helping me grow and learn. That’s even a privilege for me to expect you to help me. But I’ve learned that it is not your responsibility to fix me or make me feel comfortable. I must become uncomfortable if I want to learn how to decrease myself and increase who you are in my life. I also know you cannot stop having a darker skin than mine, which in this country leads people to think of you as less than me. I know that the power to be free from all this for you and me is not in keeping ourselves separate, but being in JESUS, who is one and unites us as one with His Father and our Father.”*

On this Reformation Sunday, you see, when we are able to give glory to God, the judgment of racial sin, of not accepting the other person because of the color of skin, is redeemed. We repent of what we represent to one another by learning how we have failed each other. We look different, but we are all sinners. When we realize, confess, and celebrate that God forgives each of us, we then see one another as God’s own. Instead of seeing what divides us, we see in each other the ONE Jesus who unites us. The hurts inflicted on people because of the color of skin are expressed, condemned, repented of, and forgiveness flows. We learn how we can celebrate what God has done —**and still will do**—in making us one. And life, God’s new life, comes into us —as different-looking as we are—but as beautiful as God has made each of us. With joy we give glory to God.

Conclusion

This learning is difficult. We ask “Can blacks trust white people? Can we and they learn how white people hurt and are confused and want to hide because they carry the story of the past mistreatment of people because of the color of skin—and need help to grow? Can whites trust black people? Can we and they learn to be constant in making sure that whites can and will change?” It will not happen if left to ourselves. It is natural in our experience to be divided. It’s in our human sinful nature to believe that nothing good will ever happen. Jesus wants all people to be free, as He said, and the Holy Spirit has given us these words in the Gospel reading today, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son [Jesus] sets you free, you will be free indeed!”* (John 8:34–36).

We’ve got some soul work to do. White folks, you cannot hate black folks and stay or live freely in the kingdom of God. Black folks, you cannot hate white folks and stay or live freely in the kingdom of God. What is the one word and phrase the devil uses to divide us? In our country today it’s the one word “Black.” Yes, Black lives matter, not because others do

not matter. That leads to that one word—fear. It is time to admit the need for more equity, more of what people need to be free from fear. Yes, Jesus matters! He matters because white and black are divided in fear. So what is the **one little word** that can knock Satan out, that can “fell him” as we read in the hymn? **Jesus!** “For us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.” “The old evil foe Now means deadly woe!” “This world’s prince may still Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none. He’s judged, the deed is done; One little word—JESUS—can fell him.” “Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is!” “He helps us free from every need That hath us now o’ertaken.” To get to “all lives matter,” we must work until Black lives matter in our hearts and minds—and in the decisions we make. Jesus leads the way! Yes, this freeing kingdom message can and is to come from the Church for both black and white people. “*Fear God, give God the glory, worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water*” (Revelation 14:7) —and we might add—the diverse skin colors of His people. No one is left out! Give glory to God!

Amen!

Bible references are from ESV and RSVCE.

Children's Message

Title: Reformation Day
Corresponds with: It Just Takes One Word – No One is Left Out
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 6 - Reformation Day
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

Today we are celebrating Reformation Day! On Reformation day, we remember and celebrate that it's not about what we do—trying to be good enough so God will love us—but it's what God has already done for us in Jesus and what He does through us by the power of the Holy spirit. So we're thinking today about a man named Martin Luther, who actually is from where we get the name of Lutherans, and he wrote a song called *A Mighty Fortress*. This is a song that we always sing on Reformation Day and sometimes other days too. A fortress is a very safe place that you can go where you know that you are protected. You don't have to be scared. You don't have to worry. And I wonder who our mighty fortress is, who protects us and makes sure that we are safe...

We're going to discover that in the words to this song. We're going to look at verse three and I'm going to explain it to you what it means. So the first line says, "*Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us.*" This line is talking about how Satan is all around, trying to get us to not love Jesus, to forget about Jesus, to think only about ourselves and not to rely on Him or love and trust in Him. But the second line says, "*We tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpower us,*" saying we don't need to be afraid of Satan or the devil. We don't need to fear him because he is not stronger than Who we have on our side, who is Jesus. Jesus is on our side. He is all powerful. Satan is not.

The next line says, "*This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will.*" So that's talking about Satan again. He knows Jesus is around but he wants us to think that Satan is strong and powerful. So he does everything he can to tell us lies, to make us think that Satan is more powerful and strong than Jesus. But we know the next line says "*He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done.*" Satan doesn't have the power. He can't harm us. He can't hurt us. It says, he's judged. The deed is done. Do you know what deed they're talking about there? The deed that is done is Jesus died on the cross. When Jesus died, Satan thought, "Ha! I am the winner! Jesus is dead." But did Jesus stay dead? No. He rose from the dead showing that He has more power than the devil could ever have. And Jesus went up to heaven to be with God and make a place for us to live with Him forever in heaven as the winners against Satan.

The last line says, "*One little word can fell him!*" "Fell him" means take away all his power. Make him the little tiny bug that he is. And that little word is Jesus. Jesus is that Word that takes away all of Satan's power because Satan is going to come around and tell us these lies. But as soon as we say the name Jesus, Satan remembers, "Humph, you're right. Jesus is more powerful." Jesus is better. Jesus is stronger. Jesus is the best, strongest, most powerful God. And He is on our side, with us every single day.

So let's pray about this together. Fold your hands and repeat after me:

Dear God // We know // Satan is still working // to spread lies // and hate. // We have your power // in Jesus' name // to stop him. // Make us brave // to do this // with your help. // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: **It Just Takes One Word – No One is Left Out**

Author: **Megan Schultz**

Video: **Children’s Message Video 6 - Reformation Day**
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. Discuss what happened the first Reformation Day. What are some ways the church can still be working to be better? (Example: addressing racism, reaching the next generation, outreach during the pandemic, helping poor and needy, holding ourselves accountable, not being hypocrites, etc.)
2. Look up the song “A Mighty Fortress” by Martin Luther. Read the words, sing it as a family, or listen to a recording on YouTube. Take turns choosing a line in the song and explaining why it is meaningful to you.
3. Look up in a dictionary (or dictionary.com) what the word “glory” means. How do we see God’s glory in our church and through our worship service? How can we share God’s glory with others in our lives?
4. Read the Parable of the Lost Sheep from Luke 15:1–7. Discuss the connection of the phrase “Black Lives Matter” and this parable.
5. The sermon shared a story of three people trying to see over a 6-foot-tall fence to watch a baseball game on the other side. Draw two pictures of this story. One showing equality: a tall person, a medium person, and a short person all standing on the same-sized box, but only the tall person can see over the fence. One showing equity: each person has the right-sized box for their height so they can see over the fence. Discuss as a family what the difference between equality and equity is and how we can work towards equity in our lives.
6. Pastor showed us what prejudice can look like through this quote from the sermon, “Considering people—what they are allowed to do, what they can say to us, what they need to do—based on the color of their skin is a sin.” When have you fallen into the temptation of thinking this way?
7. Instead of focusing on what divides us, we should try to see in others the One who unites us—Jesus. How can we do this? What does this look like?

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Dear God, as we celebrate Reformation Day, we know that more work needs to be done. We want our church and our lives to reflect your love, your beauty, and your justice. Help us to humble ourselves and admit where we have fallen short. Give us your strength and grace to try again, using your power in our lives to create change. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Heart Issues are Hard Issues

A Sermon Series on Racial Healing in the Church and for the Community

Sermon 7

Outline

Title: Reconciliation Out of Tribulation
Text: Revelation 7:1–17, 1st lesson for All Saints' Day, Series A
Author: Rev. Bertram Lewis

Introduction

Most people are impatient and skip ahead to the last page of the book before they have finished the first chapter.

- I. Our text for this “All Saints Sunday” gives us a glimpse of what is at the end of this creation!
 - A. When all our efforts and divisions seem to have failed or fallen short, what happens? For many, it will be a time filled with surprises and shockers.
 - B. In our confession of faith there is that portion where we ask God to forgive our sins of omission and commission; that which we have done and left undone.

- II. We can abuse God’s grace like it is a “Get out of Jail Free” card.
 - A. There is an accounting of all God’s gifts, even the gift of mercy.
 - B. Paul says that we cannot use God’s grace as a license to sin. James tells us that faith without works is dead, and John, in his epistle, says we cannot say we have seen the Father and continue in sin.
 - C. Jesus knows the games we play. His amazing grace is that He loves us and pours His mercy on us in spite of our games.

Revelation 7:1–17: *“then I saw a great multitude from every tribe and every nation, standing around the throne.”* That means you and me standing in grace!

- III. Think about the people gathered around the throne.
 - A. Not all will have been sinless.
 1. Not all will have escaped the struggle with doubt.
 2. Not all will have lived with unwavering courage.
 3. Not all loved their neighbor unconditionally, no matter the color of their skin or their ethnicity.
 - B. Yet all are gathered around the throne because of Jesus. He cried for them and for you and me, *“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”*

- IV. All of us are sinners.
 - A. *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “There is no one who is righteous, no not one!” (Romans 3:10).*
 - B. We sinners need mediation
 1. to approach the throne of God
 2. to bring us victory over this world of sinfulness, hate, bigotry, malice, and the places of privilege
Habakkuk 3:2; *“Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day in our time make them known in wrath remember mercy.”*

- V. What a glorious appearance the faithful servants of God will make at that last great day and hour.
 - A. What we see is the work that only heaven can complete.
 1. However, we are to be a reflection of that great image in revelation.
 2. God’s vision for the Church is a gathering of His children from many nations.
 3. In the time of darkness, that’s when God works His best!
 4. Trials do not last forever.
 5. One day you will come out of the tribulation and experience the gracious comforts of God. Wait and be faithful and He will see you through.

Sermon

Title: Reconciliation Out of Tribulation
Text: Revelation 7:1–17, 1st lesson for All Saints' Day, Series A
Author: Rev. Bertram Lewis

Is there anyone out there like me? I am not one who will read a book, watch a movie—especially one that might hold my attention—where I am not tempted to skip ahead to the end and find out what happens.

Our text for this All Saints' Sunday tends to do what I like: give me at least a glimpse of what is at the end! When all the battles, adjustments, trials, tribulations, sorrows, and despair have been endured, it shows what happens.

When all our efforts and divisions seem to have failed or fallen short, what happens?

For many, it will be a time filled with surprises and shockers. Surprises because of what might happen as we tried to live life among the most diverse situations we encounter. And shockers because it may or may not turn out the way we tried to work it.

In our confession of faith there is that portion that we speak asking God to forgive our sins of omission and commission; those which we have done and left undone.

And the funny part about it is we will want to cast it all on Jesus to save us from eternal damnation. Not being held accountable, but like little children, saying “Jesus did it. I was always in the right! Jesus did it so lay it on him.”

But let me be as honest and direct as I can be—even to the point of offending some—so that you might be saved! The opportunity to enter eternal bliss is laid on each one according to how he or she has believed in Jesus. How he or she responded to the love Jesus gives to all in their life's journey!

And there is One who knows all you have done and stands in their place assuring your redemption. Your guaranteed redemption is not the result of your plans; your salvation is guaranteed right now! Not something you can merit on your own, but it will be laid upon you by God's amazing grace!

Looking at Revelation 7:1–17, there is an amazing thing taking place: 144,000 will be sealed to eternal life. And there are some bodies of faith which believe that it will be all. But reading on from verse 9, John said, “*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.*” That means you and me standing in grace!

None will have been sinless. Not all will have escaped the struggle with doubt or wanting to give in and give up. Not all will have been those who lived with unwavering courage, or never uttered a bad word or never had some ugly thought about their neighbor. Not all will have thought well of their neighbor even though they looked different. Not all will have acted with compassion when they saw someone in need regardless of their ethnicity or skin color. As Jesus looks upon our brokenness, our inconsistent love, our prejudices, He cries out “... *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing ...*” (Luke 23:34). Exactly what he did for you and me.

Here's the real deal: all of us are sinners. As Paul wrote, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” (Romans 3:23). “*There is no one righteous, not even one!*” (Romans 3:10).

With that, beloved, what will be our plight at the end? When you get the opportunity, go back and read Revelation 7:1–17 again. Then ask yourself how it will be at the end of your life.

We sinners need mediation, even when we did not provide mediation for someone else. When we had our knee on their neck and would not let them breathe or even catch a life-giving, life-sustaining breath. We need a mediator to approach the throne of God. One clothed with the robes of justification and holiness. One who is able to bring us victory over this world

of sinfulness, hate, bigotry, malice, and the places of privilege we have etched out for ourselves, even to the detriment of others. We need to come with palms in our hands just like conquerors would appear in their triumph!

I do not know about you, but what a glorious appearance the faithful servants of God will make at that last great day and hour. After fighting the good fight of faith and finishing our course, with a loud voice we will give to God and the Lamb the praises of the great salvation.

There won't be anyone with two-faced examples of faith, but they will be with that multitude from every tribe and nation enjoying eternal happiness and will bless both Father and Son publicly and with fervor!

What we see is the work that only heaven can do—which we ought to begin right now—that our heart might be in it. Filled with joy, that we made it, as we long for that world where our praises as well as our happiness will be made perfect.

Here is why: When we have messed up, given up hope, charted our own course, deserving God's disdain and His unmerciful, unrelenting wrath, God remembers mercy as written in Habakkuk 3:2, *"Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy."*

So, when you experience trials, ask God to use you to win others to the Savior even in the midst of troubles, because in the hour of trouble, in the time of darkness, that's when God works His best!

Just at the moment when those who thought their place of privilege and hard-heartedness would keep others out. At that moment when many thought having their knee on somebody's neck so they couldn't breathe would stop their entering in, God stirs up and steps in to bring reconciliation to end systematic racist tactics, that we might be able to say like John: *"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude ... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ... and crying out with a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10).*

And I'll go as far as to say what they were singing, the same thing we will sing, "We have overcome this day! Thank the Lord for being so good to us!!"

Trials do not last forever. One day you will come out of the tribulation and experience the gracious comforts of God. Wait and be faithful and He will see you through. One day you will be standing with the great multitude. Standing around the throne holding palm branches and singing praises with a loud voice. Because despite your past sins, God has forgiven you and brought you through.

Bible references are from ESV and NIV.

Children's Message

Title: Revelation
Corresponds with: Reconciliation Out of Tribulation
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 7 - Revelation
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

Hi! Today I have a funny story that I want to tell you about. During quarantine, we all had some extra time on our hands. Maybe you played outside in the backyard. Maybe you played games inside with your family. Maybe you baked cookies or cleaned your room. Who knows? You had all that extra time! One thing that I did with my extra time was watch TV. I was watching a show with my parents and it was a show that they had already seen. So before the show would even start, when we all sat down, they would start talking about what was going to happen in the show and how it ended. And I would say, "Hey, spoiler alert!" I didn't want them to spoil the show for me by telling me everything that was going to happen before it even happened!

In today's reading, we are getting to see a spoiler! But not of a TV show. We get to see what happens at the end of the world! We are reading from a book called Revelation. Revelation was written when a man named John, who was a believer in Jesus, got to see a picture of what was going to happen at the end of the world. So I'm going to read to you from the 100% true Word of God that John wrote down for us to read today. In Revelation 7:9, here's what John saw: *"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the lamb wearing white robes and were holding Palm branches in their hand."*

It's telling us that all people were together worshiping God. So in a movie, you don't want to tell people the ending, but in life, we want to tell everyone the ending, because it's so amazing! During these messages, I've been talking about many different things. We talked about *division*—that's when people are divided against each other, black people, white people, rich people, poor people, all just separated, told that they can't be together because they're so different. We've been learning about *pride*. Pride is thinking that you're better than someone else. That you're more important than what other people think and what God thinks. We also talked about *identity* and the outside of our identity and how some people are treated wrongly because of the way that they look, not anything they've done on the inside. Just the way that they look. Well, I want to tell you all of those things I just told you about those terrible things from Satan: in the end of the story, Satan loses! None of those things win!

We are not divided; we do not have pride; our full identity, as God sees us, is what we see. Jesus wins. All people, no matter what they look like, no matter where they come from, are together, worshiping God, praise God for that. I'm so excited. And you might be thinking, this just sounds so great. Why can't it happen right now? I want to tell you it CAN happen right now. We know that Jesus loves all people, no matter what they look like, what language they speak or where they come from. And God has given us the power to say no to sin and all those lies that Satan wants us to believe. So when you tell your friends who look different than you, or believe different things than you about Jesus—"Spoiler!!!"—you're living out the end of the world, that we can all be together, believing in Jesus.

When you worship God by singing a song about how great he is—"Spoiler!!!"—you're singing the song that we're all going to sing together in heaven, when we get to see Jesus and God on the throne as the King of the world. And when you tell God that you are sorry for your sins and you thank Him for the forgiveness that Jesus paid for, for you, by dying on the cross—"Spoiler!!!"—you get to live knowing that because of Jesus dying on the cross, our sins, aren't keeping us out of heaven. We get to be in heaven with God and everyone else who believes in Him. So we don't have to wait to live out this beautiful picture that John shared with us in Revelation today.

Let's pray about living this way now. Please fold your hands and repeat after me:

Dear God, // Thank you // for telling us // the end of the story. // Help us to live // and tell this true story // in what we say // and what we do // Amen.

Family Discussion Guide

Corresponds with: Reconciliation Out of Tribulation
Author: Megan Schultz
Video: Children's Message Video 7 - Revelation
michigandistrict.org/heartissuessermonseries

1. Do you like to skip ahead and know the ending in movies, shows, or books? How should knowing the end of our story on earth change the way we live our lives?
2. On All Saints' Sunday, we remember those who have died in the faith. Who are you excited to see in heaven?
3. Practice a family confession: Speak together these words: "We have sinned against You in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone." Read together God's words of forgiveness from 1 John 1:9.
4. Look up photos on the internet of artists' pictures of Revelation 7:9. Such beautiful scenes! Take turns picking your favorite images, or have a family competition to draw your own!
5. What could you say or do the next time you are in the middle of a trouble that would give glory to God and remind yourself and others that God is working for your good?
6. What steps can your family or your church take to make your Sunday worship experience like the one read about in Revelation? What is intentionally or unintentionally keeping it from being like that?
7. Many musicians have created songs about the beautiful scene we see this week in Revelation. Use Spotify, Apple Music, or YouTube to listen to "Revelation 19:1" by the Sunday Service Choir, and "Worthy Is the Lamb" by Handel. Discuss what emotions these songs make you think of and what they say about God.

End this time of family engagement and discussion with this prayer:

Dear God, throughout this project we have learned about the effects of sin in our lives. Thank you for giving us this beautiful picture of the end of the story. Satan does not win! Division does not win! Pride does not win! Our true identity as your children is seen and used to glorify you. Help us to bring about this heavenly mindset to each aspect of our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Unity in Christ Affirmations

Introduction:

This document began as a request and outcome from the meeting on Racial Healing, which took place in Detroit at the end of June 2020, among pastors and laity in Detroit and Michigan District officials. This gathering took place while the Nation was still crippled by the Covid-19 virus and all of its impactful consequences. Then, there was the image of George Floyd dying as a police officer knelt on his neck and the awakening of the American conscience and clouded eyes seeing, perhaps for the first time clearly, racial divides.

God was not surprised by any of this, and neither should we have been because we live in a sinful world. Through it all, the Gospel message of the greatest healing known to man—the reconciliation of sinful people with God and reconciliation among people who live under the cross of Jesus—continued to give hope. This reconciliation comes through the forgiveness of sins achieved only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the world (“... where there is forgiveness there is also life and salvation”). And the inspired Word of God continued to guide, inspire, and strengthen our lives and Christian response to racial divides and other problems we face so that we—God’s children—could have hope and so that we could bring hope, truth, light and Gospel healing to the world. While there is a widespread interest in discussing these concerns among all Christ-followers, we especially recognize—and are grateful for—younger generations of Christ-followers who are keenly interested in these issues and in the Church’s response and leading.

“Affirmations” are statements or propositions that declare truths that focus on a particular topic, offering greater clarity on the topic in times when it is needed. People choosing to know where the leadership of the Michigan District stand on racial divides, prejudice, or racial healing can read these affirmations. Individuals and local congregations are invited and encouraged to join with the leadership in considering and perhaps adopting these affirmations as they deem beneficial for themselves or for their ministry context. The Scripture passages that are listed are from the English Standard Version (ESV). They were included because they influenced the writers as they studied, prayed through, discussed, and inevitably formulated these resulting “Affirmations.”

Our Affirmations:

As redeemed children of God, we AFFIRM that:

1. God is the Creator of all people and all people are God’s creation, members of one family and one race—the human race;

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26–27).

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1–4, 14).

2. God EQUALLY loves ALL people of every time and generation—and for all time and eternity—of “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), “from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9) as demonstrated by the life, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus for the world;

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16, 17).

3. “Racism,” as we define it in this document, consists of prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular ethnic group, often with the belief that different races possess distinct characteristics, abilities, or qualities—especially so as to distinguish them as inferior or superior to one another—and is a rejection of Christ’s call for unity and of His clear teachings;

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

“And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:11).

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:20–23).

“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:11–22).

4. Racism devalues or minimizes the universal redemption of Jesus Christ and its intended purpose of reconciliation with God and with one another;

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:26–29).

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:10–13).

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1–6).

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:16–21).

5. Racism is a denial of the total depravity of humanity by assigning blame or fault to people based on the color of their skin or their ethnic background.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5).

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

“As it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God’” (Romans 3:10–11).

“And he called the people to him and said to them, ‘Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.’ ... And he said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone’” (Matthew 15:10–11; 16–20).

Cf. Ephesians 2:11–22 above.

6. Racism denies human beings of their innate wholeness and uniqueness as God’s creation through social, economic, and political discrimination or exploitation;

“And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land’” (Exodus 1:9, 10).

“But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Esther 3:6).

7. All of us should examine our own lives to see if we sinned against our sisters and brothers of other races, either by our actions (sins of commission) or our lack of action (sins of omission), in thought, in word, and in deed;

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (Galatians 2:11–13).

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16–18).

“Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Hebrews 13:1–3).

“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:1–10).

8. One certain strength in our congregations—and in our communities—lies in the racial and cultural diversity God intended and determined should be in the Church (the local congregation being an expression of it) to bless one another and the communities in which it shines/ministers. Therefore, we must work toward developing a world in which each person's God-given value and gifts are respected and nurtured;

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13).

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same

function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:3–5).

“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26).

9. Our commitment as individuals and as a community of believers is to wholly follow Jesus Christ in word and in deed;

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” (James 1:22).

10. Our commitment as individuals and as a community of believers is to embrace the understanding that our unity in Christ does not require uniformity, that is, the imposition of particular cultural norms (God-honoring practices, language, traditions, and values).

“John answered, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you’” (Luke 9:49, 50).

11. Our commitment as individuals and as a community of believers is to love and serve with all our effort and resources for the dignity, civic value, and self-determination of every person and group of persons, while not condoning immoral, violent, unethical, or unloving behavior according to the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, we reject:

- The practice of marginalizing people based on the color of their skin, their language, or cultural background.

Clarification: Anytime we attribute the words, actions, or motives of one person to the words, actions, or motives of all who share a cultural or ethnic heritage with that individual, we are marginalizing that particular group of people. For example, the statement, “All white people are racist” ignores the values and actions of white individuals who are not racist. Marginalizing people in this way can include statements that appear to be offered as a compliment. For example, “All Black people are good at sports” limits the possibilities and our expectations of Black people. What about amazing artists, scientists, entrepreneurs who happen to be black? While some might view the sample statement as a compliment to the athleticism of Black people, in reality it diminishes our view of their potential. A healthy alternative is to acknowledge the gifts and abilities of the individual as unique and not just a natural result of being a person of a specific race or cultural group.

- The practice of using race or ethnicity as criteria for calling professional church workers.

Clarification: A clear indicator of race-bias within our church body is the *de facto* assumption, particularly with clergy calls, that Black pastors should only be called to African American congregations and White pastors should only be called to Caucasian congregations.

- The failure to gently rebuke and, if needed, sternly warn those who marginalize others based on the color of their skin, their language, or cultural background.

Clarification: We need to speak up and gently rebuke a brother or sister in Christ when we hear them marginalizing a race or a culture. We can point out that their comment, while hopefully well intended, ignores the unique God-given ability of the individual and that individual’s faithful stewardship of the gift. (As important, a race or ethnic group’s capacity is far greater than that of

one individual.) It is hard to speak up. Yet, if we say nothing, our silence will be interpreted as an agreement with the statement.

- The practice of “scapegoating”—that is, blaming a race or ethnic group for the systemic problems of sin.

Clarification: We are much more comfortable with blaming others for our problems than accepting our own guilt. We curse one culture or race for depriving us of economic opportunity while we blame another culture for a high crime rate that has infected our communities. Not only does blaming other cultures or ethnic groups for our problems prevent us from taking responsibility for our own actions, it robs us of the power and opportunity to change our circumstances. As a result, we live our lives as victims. Freedom and opportunity begin with the recognition of our own faults, fears, and failures, and their release through confession and absolution. We avoid scapegoating by affirming that race and ethnicity are not the cause of problems; that it is broken sinful individuals like us who create problems.

- The failure to welcome into our fellowship of faith, without partiality, all who share our common confession or who are searching for truth, hope, love, and acceptance, regardless of race or ethnicity.
- The failure to provide equal access to a denominational leadership role or a platform of influence within our church body.

Clarification: While there is no formal or official process of grooming individuals for a denominational leadership role in our church body, individuals become known in Synod through circuit, district, and national service and speaking opportunities. Undoubtedly because of our lack of outreach to minorities and the resulting lack of minority members or attenders with participation in congregational life, rarely are minority race workers given opportunity to serve or a platform to speak that enables them to exercise leadership and influence over the greater denomination.

- The failure to support our brothers and sisters in Christ as they seek to build up their communities and defend the weak against injustice and discrimination.

Clarification: We fail to support our brothers and sisters in Christ with our prayers, our words of encouragement, our hands to join in the labor, and equitable financial lending and support (i.e., when loans are given at a higher percentage loan rate solely on the basis of race). While we are thankful for our legal system and those who serve in government and our police forces, sinful people have abused our trust and have failed to treat all people with respect and grace. Though not an easy or clear path, we are reminded in Scripture to defend those who cannot defend themselves and to speak out against those who use their position of power to marginalize an individual or an ethnic group.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6).

“For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey” (Isaiah 59:12–15).

12. Our commitment as individuals and as a community of believers is to demonstrate love, as we have been—and are—loved perfectly by Him, striving to embody the practices of a welcoming neighbor in our day-to-day living by:

- Advocating for equal justice under the law;
- Demonstrating mercy and being active in poverty interventions which promote self-sufficiency, healthy families, and faith;
- Affirming and encouraging those who have been marginalized due to their race or ethnic background;
- Walking humbly with our God using our faith and the mandate to love our neighbor to shape our practice of capitalism and our pursuit of God, His kingdom, and His righteousness.

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

“Jesus answered, ‘The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29–31).

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:14–21).

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8, 9).

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:18–21).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness” (Galatians 5:22).

Please join us in praying this prayer “For National Integrity,” from the Lutheran Book of Prayer:

Lord God, Ruler of all men:

We confess

*The unruliness of our nature,
The disorderly inclinations of our minds,
The rebellious whims of our hearts.*

We recognize

*Our need to be guided,
Our need to be ruled,
Our need to be disciplined.*

We ask you

*To guide us by just laws,
To rule us with love,
To govern us through responsible leaders,*

To give us judges who are wise,

*To raise up leaders with integrity, justice,
and righteousness.*

We pray you

Help us to exercise our freedom in love,

Help us to live as compassionate citizens,

*Help us to work for the well-being of our
neighbors, and even our enemies.*

In Christ’s name, amen.

Adapted from *Lutheran Book of Prayer* (1970 edition)
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For further study:

- *Racism in the Church*, Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1994.
- *Creator’s Tapestry*, Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2009.
- “Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities” Dr. Theodore Hopkins & Mark Koschmann, May 2016, *Lutheran Mission Matters*.
- *Divided by Faith*, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, Oxford University Press. 2001.
- *One Nation Under God: Healing Racial Divides in America*, B. Keith Haney, Concordia Publishing House. 2017.
- *Restoring Civility: Lessons from the Master: Your Path to Rediscover Respect*, Kent R. Hunter and Tracee J. Swank. 2020.

s.D.g.

7.2020 Rev. Dr. Todd Jones, Rev. Christopher Bodley, Rev. Dr. David P. E. Maier

Bible references are taken from ESV.

Our Contributors



Rev. Harold A. Avers was ordained into the Holy Ministry in 1968 and served Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Springfield, Ill. (1968-75) and Greenfield Peace, Detroit from 1975 until his retirement in 2009. He has been active in urban ministry his entire career. Pastor Avers also served as the chairman on the Lutheran Charities Council and was active in the community on the Detroit Walking Together Steering Committee. He also served the Central Illinois District on its Board of Social Ministry and Black Ministry Commission. He currently serves the community through Acts 2 Enterprise, the Michigan District as a Circuit Visitor (1983-present), and is on the Church Extension Fund Urban Task Force.



Rev. Brian C. Dupre is the pastor of Shadow of the Cross, Farmington Hills. Dupre received his first call in 2007 to be Pastor and Director of Campus Ministry to the students at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas. In 2008, he became the interim pastor at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Lubbock. That turned into a sole pastorate which lasted until 2016, when he accepted a call to Berea, Detroit. In 2017, he oversaw the merger between Greenfield Peace and Berea Lutheran Churches in Detroit to form Faith Lutheran Church. In 2019, Dupre worked to finalize the merger between Faith Lutheran Church of Detroit and St Paul's Lutheran Church of Farmington Hills, which formed Shadow of the Cross Lutheran Church.



Rev. Michael J. Grannis and his wife, Kristy, are the proud parents of a growing family with eight children. They served as lay missionaries for 2.5 years in Japan through LCMS World Mission. Pastor Grannis earned his M. Div. from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and was ordained at St. John Lutheran, Norwood Young America, Minn. In 2013, he and his family followed God's leading to Michigan. Between Minnesota and Michigan, he has served several congregations in a variety of capacities—from church planter to pulpit supply to vacancy pastor. He is now the sole pastor at Calvary, Lincoln Park. As a child of God growing up in the LCMS with multi-ethnic origins and an absent father, discussions of prejudice, identity, and belonging have been a lifelong conversation for Pastor Grannis.



Rev. R. Gabriel Kasper is the pastor at University Lutheran Chapel at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Prior to his current role, he spent 5 years as a church planter in Austin, Texas. His passion for preaching and teaching has led him to speak at camps, churches, youth events, universities, and conferences. He is a graduate of Concordia University Wisconsin and holds an M.Div. from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Mo. His writing has appeared in *Lutheran Mission Matters* and *Sword and Swan Media House*. In his spare time, Gabe enjoys soccer, CrossFit, reading books, listening to punk rock and co-hosting the Pint Glass Preachers Podcast. He and his wife Melissa have 3 great kids.



Rev. Dr. Robert E. Kasper pastored three congregations in Missouri and Michigan over the course of 28+ years before accepting the call to serve as Assistant to the President, CMMF, Metro Zone/Ministry Support (since 2011). In his Michigan District capacity, Rob has engaged with numerous congregations throughout the District, but in particular in the urban and suburban settings of Metro Detroit. Working with pastors and lay leaders has pressed him to a pattern of continual growth through reading, listening to podcasts, and interviewing numerous people (both lay and clergy) in an effort to understand the multi-faceted challenges facing the Church in her Commission to “disciple all nations” (ethnicities). His prayer is that the Church on earth would look more like the Church in Revelation 7.



Rev. Bertram B. Lewis graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind. and was ordained in 1990. He did his post-graduate work at Trinity Seminary in Biblical Studies. He served congregations in Ohio (1990-2007) before becoming a mission planter in Romulus, Mich. where he started Tabernacle of Praise, Canton in 2010. He currently serves St. Philip, Detroit. Pastor Lewis and his wife Cheryl have four grown children.



Rev. Richard E. Robinson is presently serving St. John Lutheran Church, Detroit. Married to his best friend, DeVera, they have 5 adult sons and 9 grandchildren. Pastor Robinson comes from a family of 12 LCMS pastors and is very proud of his upbringing, steeped in Lutheran culture.



Megan B. Schultz serves as the Family Life Minister at Large for Acts 2 Enterprise Detroit. She partners with Detroit Lutheran Churches reaching families in new ways to accomplish the biblical goal of making disciples. A 2015 Concordia University Ann Arbor (CUAA) graduate, Megan has deep roots in Detroit. She attended St. Paul, Royal Oak and Lutheran High Northwest in Rochester Hills. Through her years in the CUAA Family Life Ministry program, Megan was taught to work alongside lay leaders and pastors to explore meaningful ways of engaging the whole family in faith-filled events that integrate them into the larger body of Christ.



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