



Series Overview

A reformation is a period of recalibration course-correction. Any community around for as long as the church will experience inevitable drift over time. Yet the Spirit has worked again and again through history to draw the church back toward its center. Key moments come when ideas and practices are rethought, and core truths are rediscovered.

At Jesus Collective, we believe the church may be currently experiencing one such moment. Rapid cultural and technological change, clergy scandals, church divisions, and political turmoil has resulted in a period where “deconstruction” is the buzzword. Many Christians find themselves rethinking their faith, and many outside the church wonder if Christianity has anything true or relevant left to say to the world.

This sermon series reflects an attempt to name some of the core shifts, or rediscoveries, we believe are vital to the renewal of the church’s vision and mission. They are not “new” insights but represent a return to the wonder, radicalness, and transformative power of the good news that Christians proclaimed from the very beginning and that ignited a movement that rocked the world. Such a world-rocking movement will begin again, as it always has, with local communities who catch the breadth and beauty of the vision and commit to living out the Jesus-Way together.

Series Outline

Week 1: A different way of reading scripture

God always looks like Jesus, and all scripture is properly read through him.

Week 2: A bigger gospel

To be saved includes belonging to a community under Jesus called to live the life of the future now.

Week 3: A new relationship with power

Evil is overcome through the power of suffering love.

Week 4: A clarified purpose and a fresh empowerment

The Holy Spirit empowers us to partner with God’s work of reconciling all things.

Week 5: A new approach to disagreement

The church is defined by our shared center, not by the lines we draw.

Sermon Structure

Each outline in the series was developed by a pastor (or pastors) ministering in different contexts, countries, and continents. We encourage preachers to contextualize in ways appropriate to their own cultures and communities. The particularities of the problems may express themselves in ways unique to each locale, but we believe the impact of the rediscoveries of Jesus-centeredness have the potential to revitalize many diverse expressions of the church.

We suggest as a broad framework that each sermon in the series follow a basic three-part structure:

1 Establishing the Problem

Each of these markers captures a key truth that needs to be rediscovered at this time. The need for recalibration suggests something has gotten off course. This section helps the congregation recognize the existence of a problem, to feel the tension of a dilemma in the current way of thinking and living that demands a response. As you establish the problem, consider addressing not just the problems in the Christian movement but the pains of the wider world that has its own questions and dead ends.

2 Rediscovering the Gospel

Explore how this marker serves as an important response to the pains or problems articulated in the section above. Walk the congregation into a fresh way of thinking. What core truth do we need to rediscover? Where does this idea come from? Why should anyone believe this is truer than the previously existing story? Cast a vision for a more holistic and Jesus-centered understanding of your core idea.

3 Application

Describe what practical difference this shift makes for everyday life. How would communities or individuals live differently if this shift was made? What outcome might we dare to hope for if the church recalibrated in this way?

Series Graphics

Use these graphics to enhance your slides, and print and digital communications. Included are six graphics (one for each marker and a blank) and a .psd file.

[Click here](#) to download the graphic file.





Week 1

Overview

A Different Way of Reading Scripture

God always looks like Jesus, and all scripture is properly read through him.

Contributors:

Edem Morny, Samuel Sarpiya

Suggested Scriptures

- Luke 24:13-35
- John 1:1-18
- John 2:22
- Luke 15:1-2; 11-32
- Matt 5:43-48
- Colossians 1:15-20

Establishing the Problem (*'the itch'*)

One of the enduring legacies of the spread of Christianity all over the world has been its ability through proselytization (or coercion) to get many cultures all over the world to abandon the worship of their gods in favor of “the God of the Bible according to western civilization’s understanding.” This desire for domination via numerical success in conversions has led to one grave problem: Christians have successfully changed the name that people call on in worship, but we have a long way to go in rehabilitating the mental picture that many Christians have in their heads of this “God” they are calling upon. In many cases both in the West and in the Global South, what many Christians mean when they talk about God is not a God who looks entirely like Jesus. Rather it is a god who looks like a little bit of Jesus plus loads of cultural ideas about the gods, which random verses of Scripture can easily be found to support.

For example, while Jesus repudiates violence and models co-suffering love for his disciples, many Christians in the West are captivated by portraits of a violent warrior God who is on their side in their cultural wars. They thrive on an us-vs-them paradigm and have “the Bible” backing them up in these battles. Others prefer to live in the comfort of consumerist lives, not to be bothered by the tensions of racism, gender and socio-economic injustice that surrounds them. After all, salvation in their minds is an individual affair. For still others, the Bible is a gold mine of verses to support their political and theological aims, a posture which tends to lead to verbal and non-verbal abuse of those who they consider opponents to their views.

What about those of us in the Global South? While we celebrate the rise of Christianity in this region, many on the ground can almost see a directly proportional increase in corruption in public and private business, a breakdown in family cohesion due to spiritual overreach and abuse, a lack of care for the needs of the poor and profligacy and brazen immorality in the lives of many clergy. It is common to see a church in every street corner in a country like Ghana (this author’s home), but while many may shout the name “Jesus” or “God” in worship,

the attributes ascribed to this Jesus make him look more like the animistic god "Akonedí" than the Jesus of the Gospels.

All this then leaves the secular-minded person to surmise that the Christian religion is just like any human-made religion. Since these religious myths seem to be all made up to suit the perspectives of each culture, perhaps God, even if God really exists, is unknowable. After all, the Bible – read the way many Christians do – supports the same violence and oppression as many other religious books. Religion then must be treated as a private affair, which should not impinge in any way on public life, as we all work towards the secular goals of tolerance for anything—except when what we're asked to tolerate doesn't sit well with secular values.

And yet deep down in our souls, both the Christians and those of a secular bent continue to feel the need to be accepted, to be known and to be understood. We yearn for our lives to have purpose and meaning. We desire to not feel ashamed, but to be ourselves in the company of people groups that accept us. We desire justice to be done, even as we also desire to be treated with mercy when we are at fault. We work to be able to provide for life's needs, but we desire not to be enslaved by work or by our needs. We yearn for freedom, and yet we know that unbridled freedom breeds chaos. We still need a God. But which one?

Rediscovering the Gospel

All people have a mental picture of their gods (even those who claim not to have a god) that impacts how they view themselves and their relationships with other humans and the world. For example, in the first century Greco-Roman world, throwing unwanted babies on the rubbish heap was the norm, a practice that drew little emotional anguish from its practitioners. Unlike early Christians and Jews of their time, ordinary Greco-Roman religion had no conception of all humans as being made in the image of God and worth treasuring and preserving. Only the emperor and priests were "sons of God". These assumptions of what, and who, God looked like had real implications for everyday living.

I want to propose something to us Christians: instead of viewing Jesus as the "pleasant side of God," we should look at Jesus as the accurate picture of what God looks like.

The problem for many Christians might be that we think Jesus is too good to be true and need to supplement him with other portraits of God we see elsewhere, including in scriptures that seem in tension with his character. For the secular person, perhaps the God that Christians have exposed you to makes you think the Christian God is just like the gods of most other religions, not worthy of two minutes of your time. The problem for you might be that Jesus has become too ordinary.

But the story of Jesus is unsettling if you pay attention. To understand him, the people in Jesus's day had to change their understanding of what "God" meant. Two Jews who walked with him on the road to Emmaus had to have their own story of God retold from a different perspective before they could grasp the significance of Jesus. John 2:22 says that Jesus had to die and be resurrected before his disciples understood him and how he read scripture. When a person needs to be resurrected before they can be understood, we are no longer in "ordinary" territory. Add onto this the fact that resurrection itself is not "ordinary," and we may be dealing with something more radical than we've been taught to think.

Once Jesus' disciples grasped the paradigm shifts produced by Jesus, they never viewed the Bible the same way again. The disciple's views of God were permanently changed because Jesus became their primary way to understand God. And scripture became all about God as they understood how Jesus explained and modeled him. It is such a shift in paradigm that can

lead to a conclusion like, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (Col. 1:15).

You can see the struggle to be faithful to scripture and yet read it differently in light of Jesus all over the letters of Paul. After comparing Paul to a lot of other Jewish thinkers of his age and before, New Testament historian John M.G. Barclay says this about Paul’s elevation of Yahweh’s promise to Abraham above his “covenant of circumcision” (aka “the Law”): “[It] was unnatural for anyone reared in the Jewish tradition ... to decenter the Law, to limit its role in history to an interlude ... but that is what Paul does in Galatians 3-4”.¹

We propose that the only way a trained Pharisee in first century Judaism could conclude that the law was a “guardian” until faith came was because they had caught a vision that Yahweh had always been like Jesus. This meant that scripture (at this point only the books of the Old Testament) needed to be read differently so that both Jews and Gentiles now could be included in the people of God simply by trusting in Jesus. Perhaps we’ve gotten so used to reading those words we haven’t been hit by how radical that claim was to make in Paul’s time.

Another example in which scripture is read differently in light of Jesus is in Paul’s instructions to the Roman house churches about how to respond to evil and persecution meted out to them. Paul tells the Roman house churches in Romans 12 to “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (v 14) and “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (v 17). In support of this teaching, Paul quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22 of the Hebrew Bible - “if your enemy is hungry, feed him ...” The same Hebrew Bible also contains Deut. 19:21 - “Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” But Paul is convinced that God has always looked like Jesus, and so he prioritizes the portions of scripture that reflect this revelation of who God is.

Paul doesn’t get rid of scripture or minimize it; he simply refocuses his lenses where Jesus has shown that it needs to be refocused. Paul’s reading of scripture is not flat. Not everywhere has the same weight. The Jesus-looking portions trump everything else before or after them. It doesn’t mean these other passages of scripture are useless; they just don’t dictate the ethics Paul teaches his churches to follow.

Can we follow in these footsteps and sit with the discomfort of Jesus as “the only one who has made the Father known” (Jn 1:18) rather than be quick to throw his yoke away to return to the familiar gods of our cultures or popular ideas of religion?¹

Application

If God had always been like Jesus, then perhaps it is not a fluke when Jesus uses his beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12) to reverse the order so that those who are “blessed” are the poor, those who mourn, those who show mercy and who are peacemakers—in contrast to the Deuteronomic blessings (Deut 28:1-14) which form the basis of the devastating Prosperity Gospel that plagues the Global South.

And if God has always been like Jesus, being willing to be put to naked and shameful death by crucifixion for humanity who were “sinners” without exception (Ro 5:6-8), can we let go of our desires for a genocidal God whose interest is in the defense of our parochial political, racial, religious, and nationalistic agendas?

¹ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul & The Power of Grace* (Eerdmans, 2020) 90.

Imagine the difference it makes when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son in response to the Pharisees questioning him for eating and drinking with the wrong crowd. The picture Jesus paints is of a God who is already longing to embrace and celebrate us in whatever state we are in, a God whose love seems indiscriminate, spreading even to those the world considers unworthy. If God has always been like this, then can that invigorate our church communities to reconsider which people who by virtue of cultural, social, or economic backgrounds are “unworthy” of our attention?

Imagine what the church's witness would be like if we were "perfect like our Father in heaven" by loving our enemies and praying for those who persecuted us, just as Jesus did for those who persecuted him on the cross. Instead of viewing Jesus as being the “nice face of God,” maybe we should take Jesus seriously and believe that this is what our Father looks like viewed full-on. Then our ways will look less like Marduk, the chief deity of the Babylonian empire, and be more like Jesus, God who became flesh and tabernacled on earth among people, experiencing all their struggles but not lifting a finger against his enemies.

Can our church communities, enraptured by a vision of a loving God who accommodates our failures while desiring and working for what is best for us, become a place of rehabilitation and restoration instead of a place of retributive judgment and self-righteousness? If God accommodated Moses’ rule allowing for divorce (Matt 19:1-12) for centuries on end while God’s ideal was always for a life-long one flesh union of self-sacrifice for one another, can our communities be more focused on how to deepen Jesus-centered love in and outside of marriages, instead of condemning those who find themselves divorced (or on the brink of it) or dismissing those who continue to be single?

Reflection Questions

1. Share some contrasts that you see between how Jesus - the spitting image of God - portrays God and how popular religion or culture portrays God.
2. What is one way in which your church community or tradition needs to take the portrayal of God by Jesus more seriously? How do you believe such a change might transform the way the church engages the world?
3. How do you think your perception of God shapes how you relate to others? Does it?
4. Can you remember a passage in scripture which causes you the most discomfort around God’s character? If you applied the perspective that God looks like Jesus and that scripture is a product of both human and divine agency, how might that change how you understand the meaning of that passage of scripture?



Week 2

Overview

A Bigger Gospel

To be saved includes belonging to a community under Jesus called to live the life of the future now.

Contributors

Hank Johnson, Adam Dyer

Suggested Scriptures

- John 1:1-18
- Philippians 2:1-11
- Romans 5
- 1 Corinthians 15
- Matthew 5:1-12

Establishing the Problem (*'the itch'*)

We live in an individualistic world. We live in a time when we are more connected than ever and yet when loneliness is an epidemic. We live in an era where we have access to almost infinite information and people and news, all in an instant, and yet where community is crumbling, violence is increasing, and the world is becoming more polarized.

In the West but also in the Global South and elsewhere (undoubtedly due to natural human tendencies fed by western influence), we place the individual at the center of every story. This insistence on centering on our individual selves instead of the Divine has created and fostered patterns of living for me (and perhaps mine) as opposed to Jesus and God's kingdom.

We are conditioned in our world to focus on 'how am I doing?' We are taught that the achievement of our personal goals is how we measure success. We strive to do better than the generation before as opposed to perhaps working together to make the world better for the generations to come. Our extreme self-focus is now so much the norm that we fail to see how making oneself the authority on all things disobeys God and dishonors our sisters and brothers.

Our rugged individualism has also reached into our faith and theology. We read John 3:16 not as "God so loving the world that Jesus left radiance to take on skin and save the world" but as "God so loved me that Jesus came to die for me." We read 1 Corinthians 3:16 not as "we collectively are the temple where God's Spirit dwells," but as "I am the temple where God's Holy Spirit dwells."

We believe in a gospel of privilege; a gospel that says that God is on my side, will protect me and bless me and answer my prayers. But we are actually invited into a gospel of participation; a Gospel that calls us to recognize the Lordship of Jesus and to partner with Him and with his

community, the church, to bring about His kingdom. A gospel that calls us to be on God's side. To be the blessing and to be a conduit of God's blessing to the world around us.

In Romans 8:28 we read "God will work all things for good for those who love Him." I find it interesting that an alternative translation of that text reads, "God works together with those who love Him to bring good in all situations." The first is a gospel of privilege, but the second is a gospel of participation. A much bigger gospel that is beyond us as individuals. A gospel that we can only live out together, inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

There are countless New Testament directives that we read individually, that are meant for the collective. A favorite is Jesus' command not to worry (Matthew 6:34). As an individual, we may find it impossible not to worry about what to eat, what to drink and what to wear. However, together as one body and family, we can...not worry by collectively trusting that God knows our needs and by helping to provide for each other as we all seek God's kingdom together.

Jesus, and the writers of the Bible knew that the way of Jesus was beyond any individual. Even Jesus lived it out in community. Community with God as Trinity but also community with his disciples. We are invited into relationship. We live out this kingdom in community. We bring about this kingdom one act of love at a time—a truth that necessitates human connection, interaction, communion, and love.

We see the cost of individualism all around us. Mental health challenges are rising dramatically, family breakdown is rising and repeating through generations, societal breakdown is increasing, polarization is spawning violence, dehumanization, othering, hatred, and silencing. We see the divide between the rich and poor widening as people pursue their own success or security or power at the expense of their social responsibility and the wider community wellbeing.

Thinking about the whole and not only the individual cleanses us from thoughts that God is only interested in saving souls and not creation itself. It reinforces within all of us that Jesus is Savior of the world and Lord of all life and all things within it. We are not saved only as individuals who then get to reside in an irrelevant and incidental body called the church; we are invited into a much bigger story of salvation, to partner with God in the reconciliation of all things.

Our faith is not meant to be so privately hidden that we forget to be light and blessing to the world. Our faith is not mostly about consenting to right ideas but submitting to Jesus as revealer of God and as model for true humanity. Our faith should increasingly be less about me and more about we – and we are helped in all of this by the Holy Spirit. We are not created to live individualistic lives. We are created for community. And community is at the heart of our gospel, and at the heart of what salvation looks like.

Rediscovering the Gospel

In Genesis we are told that man is created in God's image. Male and female, God created us as image-bearers of Him to all creation. It is an exciting and challenging truth that every single person we meet carries that divine spark. Each of us is created to be a visible representation of the invisible God. An image-bearer of the Creator. We were created to reveal to all creation something of what God looks like. That makes each one of us precious and beautiful. And it means that every person we meet carries something of God that we might not see, experience, or understand without them. So, everyone is a gift.

But our image-bearing doesn't just function within us as individuals. This spark is illuminated and ignited in us by the Spirit. And where we gather together, worship God together, pray together, work together for God's kingdom, God's Spirit is present and at work. We encounter God through communion with each other.

In Exodus 19 God speaks to the Israelites and explains that they are a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. These two metaphors are a development of the same idea. As a nation they carry the divine spark collectively. As a nation they are created and called to demonstrate to the world what God is like. They are a nation of priests. Priests are the intermediaries between God and humanity. Here God is saying they perform this function as a whole, not as individuals. Other tribes and nations should look at Israel to see what God is like and who God is.

We see this in action in the book of Joshua. Despite the Israelites' doubts, failures, insecurities and lack of confidence, the people of Jericho seem to have been in little doubt that the God of the Israelites was different from the gods they worshipped. When the spies go into Jericho they are told:

We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. (Joshua 2:10-11)

The people of Jericho have known for years. But Israel's calling to be different wasn't just about striking fear into other nations and personally benefiting from God's blessing. Instead, they were blessed to be a blessing. Israel was called to include refugees, to show generosity, to look after the poor, the outsiders, the aliens. God made it clear to Abraham and then the family of Israel that they were to be a blessing to the nations. This light, we are told in Isaiah, is not to be just for Israel, but for all peoples. There was a much bigger story going on here.

And that is true for the church too. Jesus calls us to live differently. To be a blessing and to work with Him to bring about His kingdom here on earth. A kingdom that sees the restoration and reconciliation of ALL THINGS. All people, all nations, all creatures, all creation to be reconciled under Christ.

It is incumbent on us to be a people of peace and reconciliation rather than violence and division. A people of grace rather than judgement. A people of generosity and justice. A people of sacrifice rather than rights.

The world should be able to look at us collectively, as the body of Christ, and see something of what God is like. They should see a Jesus who loves the outsider, who heals the sick and includes the rejected. A Jesus who challenges systems of power rather than cozying up to or

even creating them. A Jesus who rejects violence and abuse of power. A Jesus who draws people to Him. A Jesus who forgives the sinner, brings those who are dead back to life, and brings color and vibrancy to a dreary and painful world. A Jesus of sacrifice who pours out His life for the unworthy. A Jesus who is love.

In Christ, we are no longer to live for ourselves. To declare that “Jesus is Lord” means we are no longer the centers of our universes. To be “in Christ” means that together, we are Christ’s Body to our world. With the Spirit’s loving and enlightening guidance, we tell the story of Jesus and participate in the working out of His kingdom.

Kingdom is a subject never too far from Jesus’ heart. He taught more about kingdom than just about anything else. Jesus wanted his followers to have a composite picture of life in the kingdom, so he teaches right living (motives, actions, following Jesus’ example) and right thinking (perspectives, ideas, Jesus as moral center). We see this in his compiled lessons we know as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and in his parables. In these stories, Jesus teaches that God’s kingdom is open to everyone, that invitation and acceptance is from God, that the end result is big, but the process starts out small, that it demands all of one’s being (mind, body, soul, will, hopes, etc.), and that it impacts all of life around us.

Application

At Yeoville Community Church, where I lead, in Somerset in England, we see ourselves as good news for the whole community. Our mission statement is ‘living out faith, hope and love in our community.’ We believe that if God is involved in our community, then our community should see the fruit of that and the blessing of that presence. We don’t see our faith as something to be preserved but rather lived out generously. So we open our building all week for the community. We are the vaccination center, the blood donation center, the food bank, and the welcome hub and support centre for refugees from all over the world.

We provide a place of refuge and support for the homeless which incorporates health care, education and training support, mental health and addiction support and so much more. We provide intensive support to families in crisis, helping them navigate challenges, establish healthier patterns and routines and build stronger relationships. We work in schools, and youth centers. We provide parenting support and ‘stay and play’ sessions. We support the elderly and visit those who are isolated and lonely. And we invite our whole community to join in and participate in God’s kingdom, bringing restoration, reconciliation, healing and help to our community.

We hold hope for those who aren’t strong enough to hold it for themselves. We show love to those who believe themselves to be unlovable. We partner with health, government, police, housing associations, local businesses, education, other churches and more to find better, more hope-filled, Jesus-like solutions to problems we see in our community.

We live out our faith together. We do it in community with each other and with the community around us. Participating together in what God is up to. Living out faith hope and love in our community.

In a speech in Washington at the national prayer breakfast, Bono said, “Stop asking God to bless what you’re doing. Get involved in what God is doing, because it’s already blessed.”

The communal God invites us to be in communion with Him and each other, and to partner with Him in bringing good in all situations, to all people and all nations and all creation.

Until we realize the renewed earth and renewed heaven, where there is no weeping, no pain, no suffering, no division, no hate, no fear, no death.

Here are some practical ways we can be faithful to God, and our world:

- Be present where we are present. God has placed us where we are, gifted us with our particular people and our particular gifts. Be faithful, here.
- Think communally. God has called us to belong to God and one another. Our theology, practice, and witness must be to and for the community, not simply for me and mine.
- Do some regular soul-searching (Psalm 139:23-24): "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."
- Listen, really listen, to people who are different from you in your church and community.
- Build relationships and maintain them in truth and love.
- Refuse to accept diversity as extra-biblical. Learn, teach, model and embrace the diversity of God's kingdom
- Learn and keep learning. Your perspective is not the only perspective that matters. Check your bookshelf and expand your sources.
- Be empathetic. Let your heart break for the things that break God's heart. Let your heart break for the things that break other people.
- Invest in your local people and communities. Find out what's happening locally, join in and help.
- Pray

Reflection questions

1. What are some things that you have been taught about Christian faith or life that seem to put the focus more on the individual than the community?
2. How does the fuller story of the gospel impact the way we live our faith as individuals and as the Body of Christ?
3. Who is one person who has positively impacted your faith and Jesus-centeredness? What did you learn from them?
4. How are you helping others grow in living out God's kingdom? How is your community doing the same?
5. What is the role of prayer in your life? How do you pray, and how do you help others pray?

Week 3



Overview

A New Relationship with Power

Evil is overcome through the power of suffering love

Contributors

Greg Boyd, Leanne Friesen

Suggested Scriptures

- 1 Kings 6:8-21
- 1 Chronicles 22:7-10
- Matthew 5:38-46
- Matthew 26:50-53
- Luke 14:26-27
- Romans 12:17-21
- Ephesians 6:12

For a more complete list of texts, along with commentary, see the supplementary textual guide.

Establishing the Problem (*'the itch'*)

Our age is characterized by intensifying polarization. Largely because of the internet, increasing numbers of people have fallen into echo-chambers where their beliefs are continually affirmed and radicalized and where their capacity to empathetically understand opposing perspectives, even their *desire* to correctly understand opposing perspectives, is greatly diminished. As a result, westerners are quickly losing what once was a shared trust in foundational institutions, norms, values and practices.

Whereas political dialogue in a democratic context used to be about finding common ground for the good of the whole, it now has degenerated to being mostly about defeating the opposing side. Political opponents are no longer reasonable fellow citizens (and, in some cases, family members) with whom one happens to disagree. They are increasingly viewed as "enemies of the state," "destroyers of democracy" or simply as "evil." Not surprisingly, the escalating violence in our public discourse is increasingly being translated into violent action. Threats to our political leaders have spiked, and in the United States there is even talk in some quarters of civil war.

We see violence permeating western culture in many other ways as well. For example, in 2022 America averaged over two mass shootings per day! Children as well as teachers have been terrorized and murdered in their classrooms. At the same time, violence toward Jews, Asians, and other minority groups is on the rise, as is violence toward the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, while significant steps have been taken to rectify this problem, incidents of police using excessive and sometimes unwarranted lethal force are still too common, especially against black people. And we must of course also mention Putin's unprovoked and ruthless

war on Ukraine, with the massive amount of suffering and death it has brought. Especially concerning is the fact that the possible use of nuclear weapons is being discussed seriously for the first time since the end of the Cold War.

Yet, as Kingdom people our concern about violence cannot be limited to violence toward humans, for Scripture makes it abundantly clear that God loves the earth as well as the animals that God has created and whose well-being God has entrusted to us humans (Genesis 1:26-28). Violence is anything that violates the intrinsic worth of something, and this applies to animals and to the environment as well as to humans. God is therefore grieved, and people end up falling under judgment, when they violate the worth of animals by exploiting them or harming them unnecessarily (e.g., Hab 2:17). Scripture is filled with passages that instruct us how to properly care for land and animals.² In this light, followers of Jesus must be concerned with the inhumane treatment of animals in the Industrial Farm industry and must be aware that this industry is also one of the single greatest contributors to the degradation of our environment, the pollution of our oceans and earth's rising temperature.

At the root of all this chaos is the lust for power – the coercive power to protect oneself; the power to advance one's self-interest; the power to defeat one's enemies and impose one's will on others; and, of course, the power to manipulate nature to one's own advantage. This lust is found in individuals, social groups, institutions, corporations and nations. Most violence toward humans as well as toward the earth and animal kingdom is the direct result of the longing for this kind of power.

Rediscovering the Gospel

By contrast, the apostle Paul instructs us that while the cross looks foolish and weak to the world, those of us who have faith are to know that the cross is both the wisdom and *the power of God* (I Cor 1:18, 24, 31). When God displays God's omnipotence, Paul is saying, it looks like Jesus dying a torturous death on the cross! God power, in other words, is the transforming power of his cruciform love! This is why Paul says that it is "by means of the cross" that God is reconciling everything to God and to one another, thereby bringing peace (Col 1:19-20). The "natural mind" can't see the power of the cross, which is the power of self-sacrificial love, but we who follow Jesus are called to trust that this kind of power is the strongest force in the universe.

Whereas violence is the twin brother of coercive power, peace is the twin brother of the power of the cross. And while it is sometimes extremely costly to implement, the power of self-sacrificial love is the only kind of power that can free an embittered person to offer, or to receive, forgiveness. It's the only kind of power that can transform a sinner into a saint and an enemy into a friend. The power of the cross does not seek to oppress or enslave others; it rather seeks to liberate and empower others. While the lust for coercive power inspired humans to exploit the earth and abuse animals when convenient to do so, the power of the cross should motivate humans to enjoy, but also to take responsibility for, the earth and the animals.

The question we must ask is: In a social context in which everyone clamors for the power to get their way at the expense of others and/or the earth and animal kingdom, what would it look

² See T. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God and Natural Disasters* (Baker Academic, 2011).

like for the church to model a radically different and altogether beautiful kind of power, in the process of pointing people to a radically different and altogether beautiful God?

Jesus' instruction on how disciples should respond to "enemies" is the exact opposite of what we tend to find in the world. In the world, it's considered normal to "respond in kind" when someone verbally or emotionally or physically attacks you. *Quid pro quo*. By contrast, Jesus prohibits his disciples from retaliating when they've been wronged. If someone strikes us on the right cheek, Jesus says, we should offer up our left cheek as well (Mt 5:39).

Understood in its original cultural context, it's apparent that Jesus wasn't suggesting that we should simply allow people to abuse us, for this wouldn't be loving to ourselves or to our would-be abuser. Rather, in first century Palestine Roman soldiers frequently struck the right cheek of Jewish peasants with the back of their left hand, for this was considered a humiliating gesture. By offering up their left cheek, Jesus' Jewish disciples were refusing to accept the humiliation intended by this strike. It was a way of declaring; "If you're going to strike me, you'll have to do so as my equal, not my superior." Between resorting to violence on the one hand and doing nothing on the other, Jesus points us to a third way, a way that disrupted the oppressive power structure that subordinated Jews to Romans.

This third-way response is loving to oneself, for we're refusing to be defined by the wrong being done to us, but it's also loving toward the wrongdoer, for our non-violent response exposes the wrongfulness of our aggressor's action and thus opens up the possibility that they will repent of their aggression and become reconciled to us.

Paul teaches along these lines when he writes: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Rom 12:14). We are never to "repay anyone evil for evil" and never to retaliate against an evil-doer (Rom 12:17-18), which is to say, we must "not be overcome by evil" but are instead to "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). Hence, Paul concludes, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" (Rom 12:20). The image of burning coals being placed on someone's head is a reference to coming under conviction. Paul is suggesting that by responding to aggression with love rather than violently defending ourselves, we expose the wrongfulness of the action being perpetrated against us. As we saw was true with Jesus' teaching, this opens up the possibility that our aggressor will wake up to, and turn away from, the wrongfulness of their action against us.

Similarly, Jesus goes on in the Sermon on the Mount to teach us that, while the world considers it normal to love friends and hate enemies, disciples of Jesus are to love, pray for, and do good to our enemies (Mt. 5:44-45; cf. Lk 6:27-28). Importantly, Jesus tells his disciples to do this "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45, emphasis added). Jesus is saying that we make it clear that we are children of our Father in heaven when we love the way the Father loves. The Father loves the way the sun shines and the way rain falls. The sun warms people up and the rain gets people wet, regardless of whether they are evil or good, righteous or unrighteous. So too God loves indiscriminately, and this is precisely how God's children are called and empowered to love.

The apostle Paul makes a similar point when he declares that, "our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). While it often seems like other humans are the problem, Paul is saying that fellow humans are

never actually our real enemies and thus should never be an opponent we fight against. Our real struggle is against rebel Principalities and Powers that are continually working to turn humans against one another precisely by getting us to identify a fellow human as our enemy. And the way that we resist these Powers is by refusing to identify a fellow human as our enemy and by refusing to not love them. In the end, we are either resisting the Powers or we're being played by the Powers.

Paul succinctly sums up the call of disciples when he writes: "Be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:1-2). God became a human and offered up his life for us while we were yet "enemies" (Rom 5:10). This is the kind of love we who are God's beloved children are called and empowered to imitate. We thus called and empowered to unconditionally love and sacrifice for all other humans, even when they identify themselves as our enemies.

The call to unconditionally love even our worst enemies clashes with one of the most commonsensical assumptions of our fallen world, which is that a person is justified in using whatever force is necessary to protect themselves, their loved ones, and the fellow citizens of their country. This assumption came to be formally known as "Just War Theory." Beginning in the fourth century when the Church was first given a seat at the table of Rome's mighty power, Christians began to embrace this assumption. This isn't surprising, since it's pretty difficult to help run an empire if you aren't willing to use whatever violence is necessary to defend your borders and to keep law and order within your borders. The Church thus began to interpret Jesus' and Paul's instruction to mean, "Love, pray for, and do good to enemies *unless you have just cause for killing them.*"

As the Anabaptists argued against their fellow Christians in the sixteenth century, there is simply no exegetical warrant for the assumption that there can be exceptions to Jesus' and Paul's teaching. First, it's significant that neither Jesus nor Paul ever qualify their instruction to love enemies and to refrain from violence. They speak categorically and unequivocally. Second, the fact that Jesus based his instruction to love enemies on the indiscriminately loving character of the Father and not on the character of an "enemy," means that the character of the "enemy" we're called to love is completely irrelevant.

On top of this, when Jesus mentions "enemies" to his first century Palestinian Jewish audience, the first thing that would come into their minds would be the Romans, whom most Jews understandably despised. Rome occupied Palestine at this time, and Rome ruled the lands they conquered by terrorizing the defeated citizens into submission. If any person or group posed a threat to Roman rule, Rome would frequently respond by sending troops to whatever town or village this person or group hailed from, and they would randomly round up and crucify citizens on a local hillside and leave them there for several days just to drive home the point: "This is what happens when anyone dares to defy us!" And yet, Jesus tells his audience that, rather than loathing their ruthless pagan oppressors, they are to love, pray for, and do good them! If terroristic enemies like Rome are not excluded from the class of enemies we are called to love, then I submit that there are no enemies that could possibly be excluded from the "enemies" we're called to love.

Finally, while Jesus wanted two of his disciples to carry swords when he entered the Garden of Gethsemane so that he would fulfill an Old Testament prophesy and so that the guards would feel justified arresting Jesus as a threatening insurrectionist (Lk 22:36-38), it's important to note how Jesus responded when Peter actually used his sword to cut off a guard's ear. If ever there

was a time when violence would have been justified, it would be in defense of the one perfectly innocent human in history. And yet Jesus rebuked Peter, reminding him that all “who live by the sword die by the sword” (Matt 26:51-52; Jn 18:10).

Jesus adds that if he wanted to use violence to defend himself and defeat his enemies, he could have easily called on legions of warrior angels (Matt 26:53). Instead, Jesus choose to die at the hands of his enemies and out of love for his enemies. In doing this, he set the example that all disciples are called to pattern their life after (1 Pet 2:21).

It was for good reason that the earliest Anabaptists understood the call to refrain from violence and to love enemies to be foundational to Jesus’ understanding of the kingdom. When Pilate asked Jesus if he was “King of the Jews,” Jesus pointed to the fact

that his followers were not fighting “to keep [him] from being handed over to the Jews” as proof that his kingdom “does not belong to this world” (Jn 18:36). Precisely because loving even life-threatening enemies requires us to die to the self-preservation instinct of our old self, it is the most distinguishing quality of a child of the Father and thus the quality that most clearly distinguishes the kingdom of God from all the kingdoms of the world.

This is illustrated so graphically in the book of Revelation. Jesus fights like ferocious, like a lion, but he fights by means of a slain lamb (Rev 5:5).

Yet, the call of Jesus to love like the Father loves is not only about how we respond to enemies. No, we are to “walk in love” (Eph 5:2) and everything we do is to be “done in love” (I Cor 16:14). Our mindset should always reflect the mindset of Christ, who did not cling to his equality with God, but who, out of love for us, set this equality aside and emptied himself, becoming a humble servant to the point of offering up his life for us on the cross. In all our relationships, therefore, we are called to humbly place the well-being of the other above our own and to manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Phil 2:5-11).

Perhaps most challenging of all, Jesus’ applies the call to refrain from violence and to unconditionally love all people not only to our bodily actions but also to our thoughts and attitudes. It’s not enough to refrain from adultery with someone you lust after, Jesus says, for the act of lusting toward another is already committing adultery with them “in your heart” (Mt 5:27-28). In the same way, it’s not enough to refrain from murdering someone you hate, for harboring hatred toward another is already committing murder in your heart and thus makes you “liable to the judgment” (Mt 5:21-22).

In this light, it's apparent that the call of all Jesus followers is to strive in the power of the Spirit to purge our thought and action of everything that would violate the intrinsic worth of any person as well as the intrinsic worth of the earth and animal kingdom that God has entrusted to us. This is the most challenging but also the most beautiful and undoubtedly the most important dimension of the call to follow Jesus.

Application

1. We have seen that, as God's beloved children, we are called and empowered to imitate God by loving all others the way Christ loved us and gave his life for us (Eph 5:1-2). God demonstrated his love for us by taking action, so the question Jesus-followers must ask is: What loving action can we individually and collectively take toward others who are within our sphere of influence? In this light, we encourage churches and other communities of disciples to look for opportunities in their neighborhood to serve and develop relationships with people who are lonely, grieving, hungry, homeless, marginalized, oppressed, or otherwise in need. Moreover, since love is a verb and we're called to "walk in love" as a regular feature of our day-to-day life, we encourage Jesus-followers to cultivate the habit of loving people by setting aside whatever negative judgments a stranger may have triggered in you and simply agreeing with God that each person we encounter has unsurpassable worth (as evidenced by the fact that God paid an unsurpassable price for them). Then pray a quiet blessing over their lives.
2. We don't get good at anything if we don't practice, and if ever this maxim holds true, it is with respect to an activity that initially strikes us as profoundly counter-intuitive. We will never learn how to love our enemies unless we are intentionally flexing our "enemy-loving" muscle, as it were. In this light, it's significant that Jesus instructs us to pray for our enemies and for our persecutors (Matt 5:43-45; Lk 6:27-28, 35-36). This is the only group for which Jesus explicitly commands us to pray, and perhaps this is because this is the group that is the hardest for all of us to pray for. We therefore encourage Jesus-followers to commit to the practice of daily praying for those individuals or groups who would be the easiest for them to hate and the hardest to love. However much you may disagree with the actions and/or beliefs of these individuals or groups, in prayer agree with God that these people were worth Jesus dying for and then pray God's blessing on their lives.
3. Jesus died to create "in himself one new humanity" by tearing down "the dividing wall" and "hostility" between Jews and Gentiles, and by implication, between all conflicting tribes and ethnic groups (Eph 2: 13-18). Moreover, in Revelation we are given a vision of God's eternal kingdom that included "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev 7:9). Since Jesus-followers are called to manifest this "one new humanity" and to be a preview of God's coming kingdom, we encourage Jesus-followers to intentionally cultivate relationships that cross ethnic, national or socio-economic lines. And we encourage disciples to use whatever privilege their ethnicity and/or gender may afford them to become allies with those whose ethnicity and/or gender disadvantage them.
4. The New Testament defines *agape* love by pointing us to Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary (I Jn 3:16). We love to the degree that we are willing to sacrifice for the well-being of another. Since we are called to love and care for the earth and the animal kingdom, we encourage Jesus-followers to individually and collectively live in the question: What conveniences can I/we sacrifice to enhance the well-being of the earth and animal kingdom? Especially in light of the climate emergency we are currently experiencing, it's imperative that Jesus-followers take an honest look at how our food and lifestyle choices are adversely impacting our environment and animals.

Reflection Questions

1. Since God is all wise, all of God's instruction must be considered wise. In this light, discuss why it might be wise for us to never resort to violence, even when our lives or the lives of loved ones might be at stake.
2. Discuss the way a commitment to non-violence impacts your view of the military, politics, the police force, capital punishment, the modern food industry, the fossil fuel industry, etc....
3. What for you is most challenging about the thought of practicing enemy-love as Jesus teaches it?
4. Who are your "enemies" right now, and what might it look like to love them with your prayers, thoughts, or actions?



Week 3 Supplement

Key Scripture Texts with Comments

God's Dream for a Non-Violent Humanity in the Old Testament

I Kings 6:8-21

A beautiful story of how Elisha responded to the threat of the Aramean army by giving them a feast instead of having them slaughtered. This surprising act of kindness ended the longstanding hostility between Aram and Israel.

I Chronicles 22:7-10 (cf. I Chr. 28:2-3)

David was forbidden to build God's house because he was "a man of war" and had "shed so much blood on the earth." This shows that shedding blood was always a mark against someone and was never God's ideal.

Psalms 33:16-17

Believers are to put their total trust in God, not in military might. Even when God had ancient Israelites fight battles, they were to place no trust in their military might but were to rather trust God to give them the victory. (This, incidentally, is why the Old Testament can never be cited as authorizing "just war" today. The Bible knows nothing of a "just war" policy.)

Isaiah 2:4

This is God's vision for humanity, and it begins to be realized in the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated. We are to be *in the present* what the world will become *in the future*. We are "the eschatological community." Since there will be no violence when the Kingdom is fully come, there should be no violence practiced by Kingdom people now.

Isaiah 9:2-6

When Jesus, the "Prince of Peace" comes, all bloodshed will cease. While this is not yet true of the world as a whole, this truth is to be manifested among Kingdom people.

Habakkuk 2:7

Violence done to people as well as animals comes back to judge us.

Micah 4:3-7

A beautiful expression of God's ultimate dream for humanity. The world is to see this dream realized in the lives of those who follow Jesus.

Zechariah 9: 9-10

This is a prophecy referring to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. To walk in the ways of Jesus is to manifest the truth that he came to end all violence. In this way we point to a future time when God's dream for a non-violent humanity will be fully realized.

Non-Violence in the Teachings and Life of Jesus

Matthew 5:3-12

The blessed are those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are gentle, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (= right relatedness with God and others), those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers and those who are persecuted. Every one of these attributes is antithetical to using violence against others.

Matthew 5:38-42

Jesus here revokes the Old Testament permission to retaliate in proportion to an offense. Indeed, Kingdom people are to have the opposite mindset. We are not to “resist an evil person.” The Greek word here (anthisteimi) does not imply doing nothing. It rather forbids responding in kind to an offense. When an “evil person” uses violence against us or our loved ones, we may certainly do all we can to stop them, except use violence. Refusing to use violence when it’s deemed necessary is of course contrary to common sense. Yet this is what makes following Jesus radical, distinctive, beautiful — and profoundly difficult!

Matthew 5:43-46

Kingdom people are to love indiscriminately — like the rain that falls from heaven. We’re thus to love our enemies and do good to them. Note Jesus says we are to do this “so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.” The condition to being a child of God, Jesus says, is that we’re willing to love like God loves.

Matthew 26:50-53

Peter’s defense of Jesus was justifiable by human standards. It would have qualified as an act of “just war.” Yet Jesus *rebuked* Peter. Jesus had all the power available to him that he needed if he wanted to defeat his enemies rather than suffer. But he refused to use this power, for the Kingdom of God is about manifesting God’s outrageous self-sacrificial love, not “winning” by the use of coercive power. We are called to follow his example.

Luke 3:14

How these soldiers could have remained soldiers while doing “violence to no man” is not clear. But it is clear that this is what John the Baptist demanded them to do. To “repent” and turn to God is to turn from the use of all violence.

Luke 6:27-37

The love of those who follow Jesus is supposed to be different from the “common sense” love typically shown by people in the world, for our love is to be extended even to our enemies. Note that Jesus includes *doing good* to them — lest anyone follow Augustine’s misguided teaching that one can “love” an enemy “in their heart” while killing him for religious or national purposes.

Luke 14:26-27

When we pledge our complete allegiance to Christ, we are pledging to follow his example of “carrying the cross.” We must, like him, be willing to die at the hands of our enemies, and on behalf of our enemies, rather than resist them with violence.

John 18:36

Jesus cites the fact that his disciples are not fighting in his defense as proof that his Kingdom is not of this world. Two thousand years later, Jesus' Kingdom is still not of this world, so his disciples must still refuse to fight to bear witness to this fact.

God's Dream Expressed in Other Teachings of the New Testament

Romans 12:17-21

Disciples are to leave all judgment to God. Our job as Kingdom people is to love and serve enemies in any way possible, not to judge them. In responding in this humble, loving way, we open up the possibility that our enemies will experience conviction for what they're doing ("heap burning coals on their head"). This is how we keep from being overcome by their evil and instead overcome their evil with good.

Romans 14:17-19

The kingdom is centered on "pursuing the things that make for peace."

Ephesians 2:14-18

In his death and resurrection Jesus created "one new humanity" and tore down the dividing walls that fragmented us and kept us hostile toward one another. This one new humanity is thus centered on peace. And it is this new humanity that is to be manifested by Kingdom people.

Ephesians 5:1-2

We're to imitate God. The Greek word here is *mimetai*, and it literally means to mimic. So, we're to mimic Christ's love for us. When we were enemies of God, God didn't use violence against us. He gave his life for us. This is what Kingdom people are called to mimic. Notice we're to live in this love, which means that showing this kind of self-sacrificial love isn't just something we're to *occasionally do*. It's to characterize every moment of our lives.

Ephesians 6:12

If it has "flesh and blood," *it's not our enemy* and not someone we're to be struggling against. Indeed, if it has "flesh and blood," it's someone we're to be *fighting for*. And we do this by struggling against the spirit rulers of this oppressed world — the very rulers that are in part responsible for dividing us and inciting violence among us in the first place.

Hebrews 12:14

Pursuing peace is part of our "sanctification," for this sets us apart from the world (sanctification means to be "set apart").

James 3:17-4:1

Kingdom people are commanded to rely on God's wisdom which frees us from the need to rely on violence. We are to sow seeds of peace and thus be peacemakers.

I Peter 2:21-24

The way Jesus responded to his enemies as he faced crucifixion is the example we're to follow when confronted by enemies. Peter gave this teaching to Christians facing persecution and possible death. Even under these circumstances, they were to imitate Jesus and abstain from all violence — even in their words. We're to trust God who will eventually judge enemies if they need to be judged.

I Peter 3:8-17

We're to never repay evil with evil, but to instead pursue peace at all times.



Week 4

Overview

A Clarified Purpose and A Fresh Empowerment

The Holy Spirit empowers us to partner in God's work of reconciling all things.

Contributors

Jonny Morrison, Paul Eddy

Suggested Scriptures

- Acts 1:1-8
- Acts 2:1-4
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-14

Establishing the Problem (*'the itch'*)

I think most of us believe good things about the Spirit. We know the Spirit is God, a distinct and equal member of the Trinity. We know about the fruit of the Spirit and can recount the Pentecost story from Acts 2. But there's a difference between knowing right things about the Spirit and practicing with the Spirit.

Our modern world is very good at management and control, at developing the technical skills to achieve any problem. We go to school to become capable technicians, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, even pastors. If we want to manage our finances, throw a dinner party, or fix a car we can watch a video or call an expert. If we want to reach our neighbors with the gospel we go to a class at our church, read a book, or attend a conference to learn the necessary skills. All of this is good and in many ways is what makes our world great. We are divine image-bearers and rightly believe in the human ability to solve problems, invent solutions, and innovate our way into the future.

But there is a downside to our technical solutionism. In our confidence and control, we rarely look for or lean on the Spirit's work in our lives or world. It's not that we don't want to, but rather it's because we don't have the imagination. It is hard to imagine how the Spirit might be moving in ways beyond or outside our control.

Yet this is exactly what the Spirit invites us to do. We see this all throughout the Bible. When the Spirit arrives, people's expectations and assumptions are disrupted as they are called into something new. At Pentecost, the disciples' lives were ruptured by foreign languages and strange encounters. No one was prepared for what the Spirit did, and no one had the training to manage 3,000 new converts. All of a sudden, the Jesus movement was on the move in ways the disciples themselves could never have manufactured.

The Spirit is on the move, in and around us. But the Spirit's activity is a challenge to our sense of control, management, and know-how. It's hard to give up control; this process can produce legitimate fear and anxiety. It will feel like a risk because it is. The question for us is this: Will we risk trusting in and following the Spirit?

Rediscovering the Gospel

In Acts 1:5 Jesus tells the disciples: “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” In response, the disciples ask Jesus: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Jesus doesn’t correct his disciples when they ask this. Instead, he tells them to wait in Jerusalem. They understand something we often miss: the Spirit is here to continue Jesus’ work, to bring God’s kingdom. But they don’t understand everything. So, Jesus says, “wait and soon you’ll start to understand.”

In Acts 2, the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem. While they are waiting and praying, the Spirit arrives in fire. Suddenly “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4).

This is a beautiful moment, but can you imagine how disorienting it would be for the disciples? When the disciples ask Jesus if he is going to restore the kingdom, they specifically ask if it would be restored to Israel. Not to the world. Their imagination centered on Israel as a formal nation-state. They hoped their kingdom, their political power would be restored. This isn’t the only time the disciples struggle with ethno- nationalism. All throughout Acts, we see the Jewish disciples wrestling with the inclusion of gentile converts, debating the imposition of purity laws, and even racially segregating communion.

This is what makes Pentecost so remarkable. If the kingdom were to be restored to Israel, you would think everyone would speak and understand Hebrew. But instead the Spirit gives the disciples a diversity of words, languages, and senses. Everyone witnesses the same thing but through different forms of language. Imagine how disorienting that would be. It’s beautiful and amazing, yes. But if your hope and understanding has revolved around the national restoration of Israel, this Spirit-inspired experience would come as a shock.

What happened at Pentecost is better and bigger than the disciples imagined – but it is also different. It’s better and bigger because it’s about more than Israel or any single nation. Pentecost is about the advent of a kingdom without borders, one that tears down divisive boundaries and gathers people around the peace of Christ. At Pentecost, the Spirit makes this kingdom work “concrete,”³ as missiologist Alan Roxburgh says. We can see and taste the kingdom as the Spirit moves. But Pentecost also challenges previous understandings.

At Pentecost, everyone witnesses something new. Jesus told his disciples they would receive power to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. But who would have guessed how much the disciples themselves needed a witnessing work? Theologian Francois-Xavier Durrwell describes “witness” as “the translation of the mystery of Christ and salvation,”⁴ into “a sign language... uprising into the visibility of this world.”⁵ Slow down and read that again. “Witness” is the “translation of the mystery of Christ and salvation into the world.” It is mystery emerging and becoming tangible in the world through signs and demonstrations. In the upper room on Pentecost, the first followers of Jesus experience “sign language” from the Spirit. The kingdom becomes visible, the mystery a little more tangible, and their previous understanding comes undone.

One moment you’re asking God to make Israel powerful enough to defeat Rome and the next you’re speaking Latin. The disciples receive power but not as they imagined. This is the power of reconciliation, of participation, and of new a kind of kingdom. A kingdom bigger and better

³ Mark Branson and Alan Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions* (Cascade Books, 2021).

⁴ Benjamin Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness* (IVP Academic, 2018) 50.

⁵ F. Durrwell, “Christian Witness: A Theological Study,” (April 1980) 131.

than we imagined, one that doesn't operate like the kingdoms of the world but that looks and acts like Jesus.

Before Pentecost comes Ascension, the moment Jesus leaves the disciples to take a seat on his throne. Luke records the moment, writing:

After Jesus said these things, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going away and as they were staring toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood next to them. They said, "Galileans, why are you standing here, looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

How human is this moment? These people have lived with Jesus, witnessed his resurrection, and now they've been instructed to wait in the city for the power of the coming Spirit. Yet they stare at the place Jesus was like kids dropped off at summer camp watching their parents drive away until two strangers startle them awake. Like the disciples, we have a habit of looking in the wrong places, waiting on the sky when the kingdom is already all around us, emerging from dry bones and mustard seeds from fallow ground as the Spirit breathes it to life.

Application

- **Pay Attention:** The Spirit arrives in ways that challenge and defy expectations. When the disciples leave the upper room and begin to preach in the streets, they are accused of being drunk! How amazing that a bona fide movement of God was mistaken for a party that lasted till the early morning. But how often do we miss God's work because it doesn't fit our pre-conceived notions? Have we rejected the Spirit because it didn't fit our expectations? We need to slow down, wait, and pay attention to discern what God is doing.
- **Repent:** The Spirit shows up and challenges the disciples' nationalism. The Spirit wants to show up in our own lives and challenge the barriers and walls we build to limit the kingdom. Repentance isn't about shame or judgment. Instead, it's about turning to God and receiving the grace of something bigger and better than we had imagined.
- **Move Close:** The Spirit grants the disciples new languages to challenge their own nationalism and to help them experience and participate in reconciliation. This trend continues throughout the book of Acts. Each time the Spirit arrives unexpectedly, diverse people are made into family. We can participate in the Spirit's work by moving closer to people in our neighborhood, workplace, or café (to give a few examples). As we get to know the people around us, and as we pay attention and repent, we will be invited to see and participate in the Spirit's work.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever found trusting the Spirit to be difficult? What can make trusting the Spirit challenging?
2. Is the Spirit revealing to you any places or areas in your life that might need to be disrupted by the Spirit's work?
3. What are some moments in your life or that of your community where you have seen the Spirit at work?

4. What if we believed that the Spirit could move today, like the Spirit moved at Pentecost? How might we live differently? How might we pray?
5. What is an action step, prayer, or risk you can take this week to live in faith that the Spirit is moving?



Week 4 Supplement: Sample Sermon

“Ghost Stories”

A sermon on the Holy Spirit, prepared for Pentecost Sunday

Contributor

Jonny Morrison

Introduction: The Difficulty of Talking About Spirit

1. If we're honest, talking about Spirit can be a bit strange.
2. Part of it is that bible writers never give us a systematic definition of Spirit:
 - a. We get lots of stories and descriptions but never clean definitions.
 - b. Primary words for Spirit are ruah and pneuma = wind & breath
 - c. Spirit is often described as “resting on” or “anointing”
3. Those are beautiful descriptions, evocative images, but not super clear definitions:
 - a. What does it mean that the “breath of God rests on me?”
 - b. It sounds powerful but could also mean God's a real close talker...
4. Even the language we use to identify Spirit is a bit abstract:
 - a. We call the Spirit the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost – which are descriptions
 - b. Both other members of the Trinity receive more names
 - i. YHWH, Father, Elohim, and we have “Jesus”
 - ii. Those seem more concrete to me.
 - c. I don't know why Spirit never got another name, like Oliver or Sheila
5. Talking about Spirit can be hard because our language feels so limited / provisional
 - a. Probably part of the reason ideas about Spirit are so diverse
 - b. If you were to read 5 books on Spirit, you'd probably read 5 different views
 - c. Ranging from Spirit is active like in Acts to Spirit has ceased that kind of activity
6. I think the hardest thing is that we don't know what to do with Spirit:
 - a. We don't know where/how the Spirit fits in our lives
 - b. But I think the biggest issue is that we don't have an imagination for Spirit
7. Many of us believe good and right things about Spirit:
 - a. But it's like there is a missing impulse, instinct
 - b. It's like we know what baseball is, but never swung a bat or caught a fly
 - c. So, we lack the muscle memory to reach out and catch the ball
 - d. We know Spirit intellectually but forget in our lives/bodies
8. To start us off I think the best way to do this is tell some Holy Ghost stories

Pentecost: Challenging Our Imagination

1. First story comes in Acts 2, most famous Spirit story, what we celebrate today:
 - a. Jesus has told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit
 - b. 2:1-4
 - c. Next the disciples spill into streets where people hear their native language spoken
2. Pause on v 4 because would have been amazing & startling moment:
 - a. Startling because not everyday do I randomly become fluent in another language
 - b. But even more startling because disciples were not prepared for what this meant
3. Not the first time disciples have heard about Spirit or even encountered Spirit:
 - a. Jesus had been talking about the coming of the Spirit for a long time
 - b. And in acts 1, Jesus tells them to wait for the Spirit and the disciples ask "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"
 - c. They're right to ask this question: Jesus often connects Spirit to kingdom
4. In Luke 11 Jesus tells the disciples to pray for kingdom & they will receive Spirit
 - a. In Luke 4:18 Jesus reads from OT prophet Isaiah (quote)
 - b. This is kingdom language and would have carried hope/expectation for disciples
 - c. Amos Young, helps us understand how it would have sounded to early listeners: *"The declaration of the 'year of the Lord's favor' here, as it does in Isaiah, refers to the year of Jubilee in Torah, one that involved the restoration of land to families of freedom from servitude... [when Jesus declares them about himself] they indicate Jesus' concrete concerns with the flourishing of embodied human being in real social, historical, economic, and political communities."*
5. Disciples heard this, know this, so as they wait for Spirit with great hope:
 - a. But it is hope for Israel Acts 1:6, ""Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"
 - b. They don't ask if kingdom restored to world
 - c. And I think that makes Pentecost a very startling moment
6. Because if Kingdom were to be restored to Israel, I would think everyone outside the room would speak Hebrew.
 - a. But instead, everyone in the room speaks other languages.
 - b. And not just any: Acts 2:7-10
 - c. Languages that represent the known world, including Rome the occupier.
7. Confirms what Jesus said would happen: be witnesses to ends of earth...
 - a. But so different, before they leave Spirit witnesses to them through people from the ends of earth.
 - b. Spirit arrives to witness to the kingdom in our lives.
 - c. To meet us in the room and challenge limitations, boundaries, barriers, sin
 - d. John 14:25-26
8. When the disciples get it, it spreads like tongs of fire:
 - a. They rush from the room into the streets and 3,000 get saved
 - b. But not the last time they have to wrestle with their understanding & Spirit
 - c. Leads to next story

Cornelius: Strange Encounters

1. In Acts 10, approx 7 years after Pentecost, Peter is praying on a roof when v. 10, "He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance."
 - a. Never resonated with Peter more, I know a hangery trance.
 - b. In his trance he sees — Acts 10:11-13
 - c. Peter receives this vision 3 times & while he's pondering — Acts 10:19-20
2. Men have been sent by a Roman Centurion named Cornelius:
 - a. Centurion is a Roman military commander.
 - b. So he's an officer in the occupying army.
 - c. In every way this man is Peter's enemy, conquered his home, killed Jesus
3. But, because Spirit said go, Peter goes to Cornelius' house where a crowd has come to hear:
 - a. Amazed to see all these gentiles gathered to hear gospel and he says, "He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."
 - b. Peter had Pentecost experience but still barriers/limitations in him.
 - c. But then the Spirit meets him and leads him towards Coren. Peter says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."
4. Peter didn't get it, 7 years post Pentecost still can't imagine what God is doing:
 - a. But now he "realizes" "oh God is doing something so much bigger"
 - b. Peter then preaches gospel, Spirit falls, then Peter says v. 47, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."
 - c. I love this because moments before, he stood in the way.
5. Spirit meets Peter, leads him to his enemy, where he "realizes" the truth, gets out of the way, and gets to participate in Spirit work.
 - a. Beautiful moment, but not universally accepted as good.
 - b. Lead to final Spirit story

Council: More Than We Imagined

1. Continue to read Acts see church struggle with including gentiles, but keep joining:
 - a. In Acts 15, 9 years after Cornelius (15 post-Pent) - council debate issue
 - b. Big question is: if we include Gentiles, do they follow Torah and all it includes
 - c. Different parties present their case, Peter defends gentiles, Paul tells stories
2. When each side has finished, James the leader of the church speaks:
 - a. Acts 15:19-20
 - b. We're going to write a letter, with instructions
 - c. And we get the letter a few verses down.
3. Short and sweet, begins with some introductions and then favorite part v. 29, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following

requirements.”

- a. “seemed good” is a funny phrase – sounds like arbitrarily getting rid of “torah”
 - b. Other translations handle it different:
 - i. CEB says “spirit led us”
 - ii. NRSV: seemed good to Spirit, switches the order
 - c. Greek word for “seemed good” is dokeo translated suppose/presume/
 - d. Or my favorite possible word is “imagine.”
4. Have in this moment 15 years of the Spirit leading, guiding, teaching church
 - a. Helping them to imagine Jesus’ Kingdom, to see it as bigger/better
 - b. On their own they couldn’t have gotten there.
 - c. They needed Pentecost, and Corenlus, so many other counters with Spirit
 - d. In John 16:15 Jesus tells his disciples, “the Spirit of Truth will guide you in all truth.”
 5. Like a trail guide, the Spirit is leading the disciples, guiding them into truth.
 - a. Pressing on and unraveling the barriers of imagination
 - b. So that they can see more of what God is doing
 - c. So that they might get out of the way and join in the work.
 6. This is why we need a Spirit saturated imagination, because without the Spirit we have no imagination for what God is doing.
 - a. True of kingdom emerging outside of us
 - b. But it’s also true of so much of the Christian life
 - c. Spirit testifies to our adoption, communicates to us that we’re loved, unties us together, transforms terrorists in disciples and more
 7. In every iteration and story, we see the Spirit pressing into us the truth of God’s work:
 - a. Helping us see and believe and live the way of Jesus.

Ascension: Waiting on The Sky

1. In Acts 1, after Jesus tells the disciples to wait he ascends into heaven: the text tells us, “While he was going away and they were staring toward heaven.”
 - a. Jesus just told them they would be clothed with power...
 - b. But they stand here waiting like kids dropped off at summer camp, watching parent drive away.
 - c. love that image because I think its us.
2. We know about the Spirit, have been filled with God’s very presence:
 - a. But we are waiting, looking up at the sky, waiting for something to happen
 - b. When the truth is, the Spirit is here beckoning us to join
 - c. It’ll be a wild ride, where we are pressed outside of control
3. But that’s exactly where all the good stuff happens:
 - a. When we speak in new languages
 - b. Meet our enemies
 - c. And imagine so much more than before

Conclusion

1. In a moment we are going to gather at this table to continue worshipping:
 - a. We do this every single week.
 - b. Because as we take & break the bread we remember that in cross of Jesus a new kingdom was inaugurated.
 - c. A kingdom that tears down walls, barriers, and that calls us all home
2. As the ancient church gathered at the table they would pray a prayer of “presence”
 - a. Asking the Spirit to come upon the meal and moment
 - b. And asking that they would be attentive to the presence of God
 - c. Prayer often called the Epiklesis: offer my own version today
3. But as you come to the table, would you pray your own prayer of Spirit- presence
4. Prayer
 - a. Spirit we believe you are here, with us, around us and in us but we need you to fall on us again. We need you to meet us, lead us into strange encounters, confront our sins/limitation/barriers to hope and guide us into a truth bigger than we ever imagine. Spirit fall us on again. Meet us at this table, take this bread and make it a body and take our bodies and make them yours. Amen.



Week 5

Overview

A New Approach to Disagreement

The church is defined by our shared center, not by the lines we draw.

Contributor

Jonny Morrison

Suggested Scriptures

- Acts 11
- Acts 15
- Romans 10:1-4, 9, 12 (Paul's articulation of a centered-set approach)

Establishing the Problem (*'the itch'*)

Christianity has often been prone to disunity. There have been debates about gentile inclusion (Acts 11 & 15), the separation of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15), the Great Schism of western and eastern traditions in 1054, the Protestant Reformation, and a myriad of examples of denominational and church splits we've witnessed in our own lifetimes.

Currently we're having our own generational moment of division and disunity. As our churches have wrestled with cultural disruption, injustice, global pandemics, and deconstruction, we've found ourselves ideologically and theologically separated from the folks we once joyfully worshipped beside. Pastors, clergy, leaders, and teachers often find themselves in the middle of a widening gap. Or on one side of a massive expanse that seems to grow larger with every passing event, sermon, and email. Just as this is true for church leaders, it is true for communities they serve. Small groups, families, and friends are experiencing a division and disunity in their faith like never before. Like their pastors, they are wondering "What holds the center? Is there something that can sustain our shared life together? Is there something big enough to unite us even when so much seems set to tear us apart?"

Like the first century church, we are in a moment in which our Christian walls are being challenged. For some folks, the walls are coming down because of a conflict with tradition. I think about it like finding a weak spot in a wall. You go pull on the rotting board or broken piece and find that a lot more of your wall comes down with it. People are pulling on issues of race, justice, and gender, and more of their "Christian" walls are coming with them. For others, the walls are being "deconstructed" because of pain, abuse, and moral failures within the church.

Application

- **What if** – I love to ask my church “what if” at the end of a sermon. This question is about provoking a new imagination and allowing people to internalize and contextualize the sermon for themselves. What if we were so centered on Jesus and empowered by the Spirit that we could discern together how to be a church? What could unity in Christ look like for us? For our families, friends, small groups, and communities?
- **Unity in diversity** – The takeaway from Acts 15 is not conformity. Jewish and Gentile believers were to be united in Christ, but each group’s practices would look different. That’s hard for some of us and can feel threatening to our sense of self and to our communities. But our churches are not meant to be uniform and homogenous. They are intended to be a family, united in Christ, that would be united in no other circumstance.
- **Listen and discern** – To practice centered-set Christianity, we must listen and discern together. In both Acts 11 and Acts 15, leadership helps the church listen and pay attention to what God has been doing. Because we are united in Christ, we can sit with one another in generous presence and discern, through the power of the Spirit, the shape of our communities. This takes practice, but it’s a practice empowered by the Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the divisive issues you are currently experiencing in your life, family, or faith community? Why they are important issues to you and or others?
2. Consider: Are there ways in which your own faith may be defined more by the walls and boundaries than by the centrality of Jesus? Explain.
3. Can you imagine a way centering on Jesus could bring unity without conformity? What might that look like?
4. How can you practice being more centered on the person of Jesus?

This experience is difficult and painful. For some of us, it can lead to a complete deconstruction of our walls. We blow the entire thing up and leave, no longer wanting to be bound. Others of us see the weak spot in our wall or in the walls of others and try to add more structure, more support, more pieces to the wall to keep ourselves and our people “safe.”

The problem is walls are about containment and limits. Once someone has left the “enclosure” of a wall, that wall is powerless. For example, on large ranches walls serve a limited function because animals graze too far to be merely “contained” by a wall. Instead, ranchers build wells, sources of water and substance, to draw animals in. This metaphor has helped me think about faith. Jesus is the well of living water (John 4:10) who is able to draw all of us across boundaries, walls, and divisions to himself.

Rediscovering the Gospel

The early church often wrestled with questions of unity amid deeply contentious and polarizing debates. One of the most prolonged debates had to do with Gentile converts. Gentile inclusion had been established as a fact. In Acts 10, the apostle Peter received a clear and direct revelation from God instructing him to preach the gospel to Gentiles. What the early church couldn't settle on, however, was how to include Gentiles into the life and way of Jesus.

At the time, Christianity was a deeply Jewish expression of faith. The early followers of Jesus were Jewish and, in most ways, upheld the practice and preservation of the Torah. It is hard to overstate how important Torah was (and is) for the Jewish people. The Torah was given to them by God to help guide them and define them as a people. In exile, the Torah shaped their distinctive way of life, preserving their culture. In the same way, Torah was an essential part of Jewish life during Persian, Greek, and Roman subjugation. Modern Christians often see the Old Testament Law as 613 outdated commands, but for a people who had suffered exile, conquest, and near perpetual subjugation, the Law was a kind of wall around their identity, unity, and ethos. The Law defined and protected them.

That's why issues of Torah adherence were so fiercely debated in the New Testament. Things like circumcision and dietary restriction may seem strange to us, but for first century Jewish Christians they were important markers of identity and the means of preserving a God-given way of life.

In the early days of Christianity, following the resurrection and Pentecost, Torah-adherence was the norm because the church was Jewish in make-up, leadership, and even geography. However, as the gospel spread through Peter's Acts 10 encounter, this once homogenous community was now forced to grapple with profound questions, like "How do we include Gentiles into the life and body of Christ? Do we ask Gentiles to conform to all, some, or none of the Torah? And, whatever we choose, what does that mean for us?"

In Acts 11 this debate reaches a fever pitch, leading to a gathering in Jerusalem where various church leaders make and hear arguments. The text begins with drama, as Peter, fresh from his Acts 10 encounter, is criticized by "circumcised believers" for violating the law. In response, Peter explained to them "step-by-step" (v. 4) his experience. The text ends by saying, "Once the apostles and other believers heard this, they calmed down.

They praised God and concluded, 'So then God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life' (v.18)."

You would think that would be the end of the debate, but in Acts 15 church leaders once again gather to address the issue of Gentile inclusion. Some are arguing that "unless you were circumcised according to the custom we've received from Moses, you can't be saved" (15:1). Read that again. Some were arguing that Torah adherence was a salvation-level issue. It doesn't get more intense than that. The debate escalates, and in 15:2 we learn that Paul and Barnabas "strongly opposed" this position.

I don't know about you, but I find this pretty comforting. Peter has a vision in Acts 10 that declares the full inclusion of Gentiles, but it takes the early church years of fighting, gathering, and debating to accept the revelation as true and actionable for their communities. We've always struggled to preserve the unity of Christ, and yet God continues to be gracious to us. Maybe you find that disheartening, but to me, it helps me put my church, our culture, and my own leadership in a compassionate and historical perspective.

After hearing debates, Peter stands up and addresses the attendees saying,

Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people's deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:7-11 CEB).

You see what Peter just did there? He cuts through the debates, not minimizing the importance of the Law by any means but instead drawing Jew and Gentile together around one shared center, the person and work of Jesus.

The apostle Paul makes a similar move in Romans 10, where he is addressing a similar kind of tension in Rome. Paul writes,

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved... Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the culmination of the law [Torah] so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (Romans 10:1-4).

Paul upholds the goodness of the Torah but shows us how Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the Law, the end to which it was always pointing. He therefore goes on to say, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile" (Rom 10:9,12). Like Peter, Paul draws Jew and Gentile together around Jesus as the ultimate center of our faith. Neither Peter or Paul criticize Torah nor do they tell Jews to stop adhering to the law. Instead, they center faith on Jesus and then invite the churches to discern how Torah adherence can be lived.

This is what happens in the final moments of Acts 15. After the debates have ended, James stands up and says, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood" (Acts 15:19-20). The church comes to a compromise and decides to write a letter. In the letter James explains how and why they came to this conclusion, saying in verse 29, "The Holy Spirit has led us to the decision that no burden should be placed on you other than these essentials."

The phrase "Spirit has led us" is interesting. The NIV translate this moment as, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." The Greek word for "seemed good" or "led us" in this instance is *dokeo* which can be variously translated as "led," "seemed good," "presumed," or (my favorite) "imagine." The church centers on Jesus and then, by the power and guidance of the Spirit, is led into a way of discerning how to live. Through the Spirit they "imagine" what the church can look like as it centers on Jesus, welcomes Gentiles, and honors all their history.

What a beautiful image and what a compelling invitation for us today.



Week 5 Supplement: Sample Sermon

Contributor

Jonny Morrison

Introduction

1. Today's question "*what centers your faith?*"
2. What holds it together?
3. What draws you to Jesus?
4. What keeps us united?

Question in New Testament Context

1. This question dominates early New Testament letters
 - a. Because what "holds this faith together" was not clear
 - b. Initial followers of Jesus were Jewish in ethnicity and religion
 - c. And Christianity looked and felt deeply Jewish — so much so Rome believed Christianity was a Jewish cult
2. And in many ways, that's because it's true – Christianity is Jewish.
 - a. So, it was very easy, at first, to hold these things as one whole piece
 - b. Practically this played out with Jesus becoming the center of faith
 - c. But around Jesus was the religious structure of "Torah," Old Testament law
3. This works when it's only Jewish converts but gets tricky when message spreads:
 - a. Torah had been a beautiful boundary that defined an ethnic/religious people
 - b. But as Gentiles want in tension arises over the boundary lines
 - c. Examples:
 - i. Torah = circumcision – but require a grown man to get circumcised?
 - ii. Torah = centered worship in temple – but in Turkey? Or no temple?
4. What walls/barriers exist to knowing Jesus is first major debate – Acts 11 council
 - a. Tension spreads to churches as Jew and gentile come together
 - b. Especially intense in Rome, so Paul addresses it directly — Romans 10:1-4,
 - i. Law = Torah, Paul saying it's not the boundary/walls that save
 - ii. Not nationality, circumcision, temple – meant to be expressions of God
 - c. Paul goes on to say, Romans 10:9, 12
5. The question becomes: what holds us, what draws us forward together when walls come down?

The Why? When the Walls Come Down

1. Today we have our own walls/boundaries around our faith:
 - a. Some we can easily name and call annoying:
 - i. For example, I worked at a Christian bookstore and saw grown men argue about KJV
 - b. But most of the boundaries we build (even KJV) come from a desire to preserve
 - c. To hold something sacred/protect it and us. Keep the faith together
2. The problem is that we are in a moment like NT, walls being challenged:
 - a. For some of us the walls are or have come down because of conflict with beliefs
 - i. Loose nail in the wall, you pulled and a lot came down with it
 - ii. Pulled on history of your tradition – a lot came down
 - iii. Pulled on race/justice/gender – a lot came down with it
 - iv. If this is a part of the wall, I need to get rid of the wall
 - b. To some others it's less about the beliefs/teaching than about the people.
 - i. The people we knew/loved torn down own walls or built up more
 - ii. Many of us don't know what to do with our walls
 - c. For others experience pain/ abuse/ exploitation.
 - i. Walls that were once safe now painful
 - ii. So we tear down or hop them
3. Some of us joined in tearing them down and others start building them up
 - a. If we can get clear about definitions, certain about boundaries
 - b. We can secure ourselves and our faith and our people
4. Walls work if the thing you're trying to define/protect is small and limited:
 - a. If you're a rancher with a little land and some cattle
 - b. You can build walls and keep everything together
 - c. But if you have thousands of acres and hundreds of cattle – limits to walls
 - i. Might have a wall at the edge of your land but can still lose a cow
 - ii. So you build wells/sources of water and food that draw
5. Instead of held together by a wall, our faith can be centered on a well
 - a. A source of life that is rich and good and that draws us in
 - b. Samaritan women convo in John 4:9 "The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)
 - c. She names the boundary lines that separate the 2 of them... names it even clearer, 10:19, "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."
 - i. 4:10 "Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."
6. The boundaries of ethnicity/temple worship are coming down, a new well being dug

What Holds the Center

1. Leads to the question, what is the well?
 - a. We all have something that draws us.
 - b. Christian philosopher Pascal the wager, "You have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed." Riffing on this, James Smith, writes, "You can't not bet your life on something. You can't not be headed somewhere. We live leaning forward, bent on arriving at the place we long for."
 - c. We all live centered on something. **Is it worth it. Is the centre big enough?**
2. Someone shared a story this week, in which the walls of their previous faith came down:
 - a. Now they live in uncertainty
 - b. Previous center wasn't worth holding to
 - c. And they see another but wonder if it's worth it
3. Person said they feel scared as they look on, which is such a courageous/ honest thing:
 - a. It's like you're standing at the base of a mountain and asking, "is it worth it?"
 - b. Should I venture in, take to the trail... it'll be risky and hard. So is it worth it?
4. We all need to press into this same question:
 - a. Determines the purpose & point of our faith/life – what we aim at
 - b. It should grow
 - i. We should actually explore the mountain not just car camp at the mouth
 - ii. We need to dig a little cause our wells can run dry
 - c. Unify us, bring us together
5. What holds the center? What draws you in?
 - a. Is it enough? To venture into the mountains

Good & True

1. On the one hand, what holds the center must be true:
 - a. But there are a lot of true things that cannot hold the centre
 - b. It's true in the 90s Casablanca was remade with Aston Kutcher and Madonna
 - c. True... but not good
2. So it must also be good: That's no small request
 - a. For it to be good it but be good enough to risk the mountains
 - i. To tumble the walls
 - ii. To press back on abuse and exploitation and injustice
 - iii. To aim our lives at and yet surprising enough to stumble into

Optional Endings

1. Ending 1: The Love of God
 - a. John answers the question for us, what is the center:
 - b. John 4:7-9
2. Ending 2: Questions
 - a. If you're here, believe God/Jesus is the center:

- i. Or you're at least Jesus-curious
 - ii. But it's one thing to believe and another to be drawn
- b. I believe with every fiber of my being that Jesus is the center:
 - i. But, if that's true – what does it mean for us?
 - ii. Martin Luther wrote, “next to the Holy Scriptures there certainly is no more useful book for Christians than the lives of the saints, especially when unadulterated and authentic.”