

## When Fear Gives Way to Joy: 6. This isn't what I pictured

Matthew 3:22-30

May 31, 2020

Pastor Steve Richards

Kyrie Eleison. Lord, have mercy. It is a prayer from the heart about human need. Lord, have mercy. It is asking God for what I need when I'm not even sure what I need. It is the prayer that I turn to when I cannot come up with words to pray anything else. It is leaning into the words of Paul from Romans 8:26 - **The Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans.** As one who spends much of his time formulating the right words to speak, I sat down on Friday afternoon after thinking about all that has transpired this week, and I had no words. No words. Lord, have mercy.

This is not what I pictured. It is not what any of us pictured. If we could go back to the end of February (and doesn't the end of February seem a long, long time ago?) – at the end of February we began hearing about a coronavirus in China that had somehow spread to Italy – and though there were a few cases in this country, we went about daily lives as if everything was normal. I didn't imagine – and very few if any imagined – where we would be today – just 3 months later – a thousand dead in Minnesota, over 100,000 dead in the United States – and nobody knows where we will be 3 months from now. This is not the picture I expected. Behind every number is a person who was loved and family and friends who are grieving that person who was loved. So much pain. So much hurt. Lord, have mercy.

And then this past week right here in Minneapolis – the realization that other problems have not disappeared during this pandemic. Monday night a black man is dead at the hands of white police officers. Somehow it is a story that gets repeated over and over again across this nation. The circumstances are not what matter, because this time it ignites the anger and rage of racial injustice that has been building for generations. And before we jump to conclusions or attempt to assign fault, we best listen to that anger and rage and what emotions it causes each of us to feel and why. So much pain, So much hurt. Lord, have mercy.

On Thursday, one of our staff members suggested reading the book, *The Person You Mean to Be*, which is written by the psychologist, Dolly Chugh. The book is meant to help us look inside ourselves, to address difficult issues like racism, in order to be the person you mean to be, the person God needs you to be, and ultimately bring about a better world. And isn't that what we all want – especially now. So, I immediately downloaded the book and began reading – but I got stuck in the book's preface when I came to this question: **How can it be true that some of the time all of us act in ways that aren't perfectly ethical, but amazingly every one of us believes him – or herself to be a good person?** Let that sink in... Haven't we all had thoughts or words or even actions that were not the person we want – or the person God wants us to be? Be honest now – deep inside – so angry you wanted to smash something – so angry you said something or did something or failed to speak up or show up or do something. Lord, have mercy.

Sometimes we do not and cannot see ourselves as we ought. In 1963, 80% of white Americans felt that racial minorities were treated equally – at a time when it was illegal for whites and blacks to marry in sixteen states. In 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling on one knee during the playing of the national anthem as his silent protest of a country that oppresses black people and people of color. And that was his experience. And when a year later, he was awarded Sport's Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award, he was

attacked online with some of the most insulting language imaginable. Lord, have mercy. We watch the events of the past week unfold on television and the Internet. Folks, black lives matter. Yes, I agree that all lives matter, but we don't live in that world – not yet. And until all lives experience a life that matters and are treated as if their lives matters, we best be prepared to stand up for those who are not treated equally – and say, their Lives Matter. We shared a collective humanity, each one loved by a God who longs for each one to be treated equally. Lord, have mercy.

Before the events of this week, I planned to focus on the scripture that you heard from John's Gospel, chapter 3 – and I think it still works. John is pointing to the deep inner work that must be done – not in somebody else, but in me. John was known for his baptisms and people thought he was so good that he must be the Messiah. Are you Jesus? Are you the one? Are you the one we've been waiting for hundreds of years? John is so relevant, so cutting edge, his influence so great, people wonder, are you the guy we've been waiting for? And when Jesus arrives on the scene, this is what John the Baptist said about himself. In the midst of all the praise – in the midst of all the pats on the back – in the midst of all the followers – in the midst of everyone trying to be like him and celebrating him and naming their kids after him, he does not take the praise and put it on himself. As a matter of fact, he goes in the exact opposite direction and says: **He must increase and I must decrease.** Jesus must increase, and I must decrease. What if this would be our mantra: We must become less, and he must become greater. I'm not sure this is where we are – that this is what is running through our veins.

When you look at a full moon, what do you see? The moon does not produce any light. All the moon does is position itself correctly to get some light from the sun and when it gets that light from the sun it says, I'm going to take that light and send it to somebody else. When you and I have been called to be followers of Jesus, we are not the Sun – we are the Moon. You and I get the light from the sun and we position our lives as best as we possibly can to be a full moon. For that to happen, God is saying, I want to shine my light into every nook and cranny of your life. Look again at the moon. You see all the craters. It's been hit and battered and yet somehow the craters enhance the beauty of the moon.

If you've lived any period of time, you have some of these – craters. Things you've done in the past, decisions you've made, choices that left a dent, and a lot of times we try to cover those things up. But God says, don't hide – I can use that. Sometimes we are trying to be a perfect moon, and God is saying, I'll use the craters. I will shine light on that so that every corner of your life will reflect my light for other people. It's the amazing grace. It's amazing because I don't know how God does it, but God has been doing this for generations.

John Wesley said, there can be no holiness without social holiness. We begin with the deep inner work of becoming connected with God which must necessary change us – but that change is not complete in us until what's in our hearts empowers our hands to get to work in this world.

We live in a broken world. This is not the world God pictured – a world where people are hurt every day often intentionally and sometimes without a hurtful intent – but still it happens. We know that acts of violence are not right, and yet desperation, fear, injustice, and feelings of being left behind can lead people to do the unthinkable. We are broken. What we are seeing in the streets of our beloved communities is an indication of that brokenness. It is like a scab ripped away from a wound that has never healed – and will never heal as long as we, individually and collectively, do not do the hard work that comes when the light shines into the dark places of our lives forcing us from our comfort zones so that we can reflect fully the light of love and justice into places of need. We will know that we have become a full moon when we

see God waving a hand and we no longer assume God is calling on someone else. God is waiting. God is ready for me/you to respond.

Wednesday evening I received an email from Jesus Puricasa, the pastor of our partner congregation, Iglesia Piedra Viva. Jesus and his wife Colleen live one block from the spot where George Floyd was killed. Their ministry is reaching 41 families in the south Minneapolis neighborhoods that have been on fire in recent days. He was asking for emergency assistance, not knowing where else to turn. One of their families: a dad, a mom and two children (6 and 12 years old), have COVID-19 – all four of them. The dad had already lost his job. They are not eligible for unemployment or the federal stimulus help. They could pay their utilities. They were receiving help with food, but they could not pay their rent. And their rent was almost \$1200 – and I thought that the amount of the stimulus checks. So I immediately responded yes – we will meet that need, and I contacted a family that had already offered their stimulus check to be used wherever it is needed. They immediately said yes, but as I was writing the check from our Crisis Account, I heard this voice saying, “Steve, remember I said if you are forced to go one mile, go two. Give to those who ask and do not refuse those who wish to borrow from you.” So, I wrote the check for \$2400, double what was asked – and not because we want a pat on the back. We want the light to be reflected so that others will see the light of God’s love.

At this time, I am drawn to the wise words of Martin Luther King, who spoke so eloquently about the power of love to heal. In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he said: “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

We must believe that the light will prevail.

This sermon does not have an ending, because I believe you are the ending. There can be no holiness without social holiness. I must decrease so that Jesus can increase. Be the moon, so the light can shine. With Dr. King: “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” Lord, have mercy.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 31, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of great love, take hold of our hearts and let us sit here in the stillness of your presence as we turn our souls to you. Help us to be still ... and discover the mystery of your presence living within us. Inspire us in ways that prepare us to serve. Take hold of our lives, O God, and awaken us to the power of your love for us and for all the world. Amen.

### **Monday, June 1**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 4:17-24**

From that time Jesus began to announce, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”

As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them.

**Observation:** Jesus launched his public ministry, Matthew said, by announcing “the good news of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23). The “present tense” character of Jesus’ message is important for those of us who’ve tended to think of God’s Kingdom solely in future terms. To pray “thy kingdom come” is not just a wispy, wistful dream of an idealized future. It is a claim of our true citizenship here and now, and a way of bowing to God as our true king.

**Application:** Translators often render the Greek behind “Change your hearts and lives” as “repent,” but the Greek meant “turn around,” not just regret. This is a call not merely for us to feel sorry for our sins or even just to accept forgiveness for them, but to choose a different and wiser course of living. Can you identify one or two ways belonging to God’s kingdom has reordered your life? Are there parts of life in which the call to reorder brings you hope, not uneasiness? Could this be the season to bring order to your life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you call me to change my heart and life, to reorder my priorities and actions in ways that make my life better. And you call me to reach others who need your hope, too. Amen.

## Tuesday, June 2

### Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

**Observation:** The current pandemic crisis has given us a chance to focus on who we are, why we are here, and what our goal is as Christ followers. Jesus said God calls us to be “the light of the world,” people through whom God’s love shines to light up the dark, hurting places around us. We are here to live lives led by the Holy Spirit in which God’s light reaches beyond the walls of our church. As people find hope through what we do, we want them to praise, not us, but our God.

**Application:** Jesus said, “A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden.” In what ways will our choices about how we bring hope to those around us make our “city” of faith impossible to hide? Jesus also said we are to let our light shine for a specific purpose—so that people who see what we do will praise God. How does that purpose shape the ways we make our faith visible differently from a PR campaign meant to pursue fame or money? Choose one specific step you can take this week to bring the light of God’s love and hope into someone’s life this week.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes my love for you stays all too hidden. Help me to live like that city on a hill, not so that I look good, but so that you do. Amen.

## Wednesday, June 3

### Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

“Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you’ll eat or what you’ll drink, or about your body, what you’ll wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

**Observation:** Jesus warned against worry, though not against planning. He used hyperbole to make a point (as in “That bag weighs a ton”). That’s why today’s passage may feel radical, against common sense. That may have been even more true for Jesus’ first hearers. Jesus’ audience would have been ordinary peasant people who had to worry about their next meal all the time, yet Jesus tells them not to worry about anything. He asks them instead to view the world with new eyes, in order to see all around them evidence of God’s care and provision.

**Application:** Jesus said having our values straight is an antidote to worry. How easy or hard do you find it to “desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness”? Are there wishes or dreams that matter so much to you that (if you’re honest) you might want them more than God’s kingdom and righteousness? What choices have you made (or do you want to make) to reorder those wishes and dreams? Jesus’ teaching anticipated modern research. He asked, “Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?” (verse 27) We know worry shortens our life! What inner arguments, if any, do you make about why it “makes sense” for you to worry, why it would be “irresponsible” not to worry? How can you reorder needs from wants, so you can make plans without worrying?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you modeled a life of peace and trust. Help me to keep learning how to live a reordered life in which my energy can focus on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.

## Thursday, June 4

### Scripture: Matthew 8:5-17

When Jesus went to Capernaum, a centurion approached, pleading with him, “Lord, my servant is flat on his back at home, paralyzed, and his suffering is awful.” Jesus responded, “I’ll come and heal him.” But the centurion replied, “Lord, I don’t deserve to have you come under my roof. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I’m a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and the servant does it.” When Jesus heard this, he was impressed and said to the people following him, “I say to you with all seriousness that even in Israel I haven’t found faith like this. I say to you that there are many who will come from east and west and sit down to eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.”

Jesus said to the centurion, "Go; it will be done for you just as you have believed." And his servant was healed that very moment.

Jesus went home with Peter and saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her. Then she got up and served them. That evening people brought to Jesus many who were demon-possessed. He threw the spirits out with just a word. He healed everyone who was sick. This happened so that what Isaiah the prophet said would be fulfilled: *He is the one who took our illnesses and carried away our diseases.*

**Observation:** A Roman centurion, part of a foreign occupying force, commanded 100 soldiers. He understood and practiced authority. This one obviously accepted Jesus as an authority in this matter. He sensed that Jesus' power reached beyond all boundaries and could heal all hurts. Peter's mother-in-law (with whom Peter and his wife lived) was in bed with a fever. Jesus' healing power worked simply and quickly: "He touched her hand."

**Application:** When we (or people we care about) are in danger, we look at once for the most powerful authority available (a manager, a teacher, the police). The centurion did that. When you are struggling, to whom do you turn? God often works through people. What does (or would) it look like for you to trust Jesus as your supreme authority for healing and help, even when Jesus sends that help through doctors, researchers, counselors, pastors and the like? Too often, Christians either focus their ministry to God's world exclusively on the spiritual (eternal salvation through Jesus), or else exclusively on the social (making the broken conditions of life in our world better). Jesus clearly did both. How can studying Jesus' pattern of ministry help you to avoid trying to make a false choice between spiritual and social action?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you were a healer whether the illness and its healing were physical or spiritual. I sometimes need both, and so does the world around me. Grow me into a servant who lives out your holistic mission. Amen.

## Friday, June 5

### **Scripture: Matthew 8:23-34**

When Jesus got into a boat, his disciples followed him. A huge storm arose on the lake so that waves were sloshing over the boat. But Jesus was asleep. They came and woke him, saying, "Lord, rescue us! We're going to drown!" He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you people of weak faith?" Then he got up and gave orders to the winds and the lake, and there was a great calm. The people were amazed and said, "What kind of person is this? Even the winds and the lake obey him!"

When Jesus arrived on the other side of the lake in the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed came from among the tombs to meet him. They were so violent that nobody could travel on that road. They cried out, "What are you going to do with us, Son of God? Have you come to torture us before the time of judgment?" Far off in the distance a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons pleaded with him, "If you throw us out, send us into the herd of pigs." Then he said to the demons, "Go away," and they came out and went into the pigs. The whole herd rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned. Those who tended the pigs ran into the city and told everything that had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole city came out and met Jesus. When they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.

**Observation:** Jesus' followers (who'd fished Galilee for a living) knew severely strong storms could blow up on that inland lake. Hebrews believed only God could restrain the sea's stormy chaos. In a storm, Jesus slept in the boat. Awakened, he amazed the disciples by calming the

storm. Landing, they met two terribly strong, unstable men. (Note: Mark and Luke only wrote about one man in this story.) Jesus reordered their disordered lives by calming their inner storms, just as he had the sea. Most of us are feeling the current Covid-19 plague and shutdown conditions as a huge “storm.” As you face this stormy life season, have you had any sense Jesus is “in the boat” with you? It has been said that sometimes He calms the storm, and other times He calms His child. In which of those ways has Jesus most been with you in this storm? However much longer this goes on, how can you trust God to bring new order out of the disorder of this difficult time?

**Application:** Has the outer crisis created any inner storms for you, perhaps giving you insight into feelings and attitudes for which you’d value healing and hope? Do you believe Jesus’ power is available for you, directly or through human instruments, as it was for the men in today’s story? Are there any ways God is calling you to become a channel of hope to others facing life’s storms? How might a deeper involvement in God’s healing mission bring new freedom and purpose to your life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes my emotions feel like one of the thunderstorms that blow through our area. Thank you for always offering me peace, and help and healing if the storm threatens to last. Amen.

## Saturday, June 6

### Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13, 20-22, 35-38; 11:28-30

As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, “Follow me,” and he got up and followed him. As Jesus sat down to eat in Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard it, he said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and learn what this means: *I want mercy and not sacrifice.* [a] I didn’t come to call righteous people, but sinners.”

Then a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years came up behind Jesus and touched the hem of his clothes. She thought, If I only touch his robe I’ll be healed. When Jesus turned and saw her, he said, “Be encouraged, daughter. Your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed from that time on.

Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.”

“Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

**Observation:** In today’s readings, we see Jesus’ heart, yearning to set right all the disorder in the world. He was, literally, “a man on a mission.” He worked tirelessly to reorder people’s lives to physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness. He invited everyone, in his day and in ours, to bring our frantic, frustrating, disordered lives to him. He offered rest, not in self-seeking idleness

but in reordered living built around his compassionate, restoring mission. He said the greatest commandments that guide that life are, “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, [Deuteronomy 6:5] and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You must love your neighbor as you love yourself’ [Leviticus 19:18].”

**Application:** How did Matthew express the reason for Jesus’ compassion when he saw the crowds? To what extent do you think some of your neighbors, co-workers, maybe even people you know from church are “troubled and helpless...sheep without a shepherd”? How much do you care about their well-being? Most people in Jesus’ day despised and shunned tax collectors as traitors. Jesus’ readiness to accept Matthew (and his friends) must have been an incredibly healing, reordering moment. How can Jesus’ pattern of extending love and kindness to everyone help you see others not through filters of judgment, prejudice or fear, but through Jesus’ eyes? Jesus didn’t say, “Come to me and try really hard to find rest.” How can you “try” less on your own, and trustingly open your life more to the Holy Spirit’s reordering presence in your life?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I love you, and I really want to love my neighbors. Thank you for the multiple stories of the ways you reordered people’s lives. I invite and welcome that reordering power to work in me, too. Amen.