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5th Sunday in Lent

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Children Of God”

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## **Matthew 10: 7-10 & 16-20**

7 As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. 9 Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food.

16 'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19 When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

## *The Children Of God*

Recently I had the opportunity to attend a training through Case Western Reserve University's office of Title IX. Green Dot is a national program built on the premise that everyone can measurably and systematically reduce violence within any given community. This program focuses fundamentally on the productive power of bystanders, on those of us who witness power-based violence among others. In instances of harmful or violent words, actions, or behaviors, bystanders have a choice to ignore & accept the abuse (what we call a "red dot") or intervene and address the violence (a "green dot"). Green Dot's goal is to prepare communities to implement a strategy of violence prevention that reduces power-based violence within your own community. Green Dot seeks to build a community of everyday advocates equipped to intervene in red dot incidents and to create a community full of Green Dot moments that declare we will not to accept the status quo.

Violence is a community issue. It is not a liberal or conservative issue and it's not your issue or my issue. It's our issue. Jesus' whole ministry is calling on us to respond. To live differently — non-violently. He is calling us to be everyday advocates and to approach our lives in a way that deconstructs the status quo and allows life to expand and flourish, the Kingdom in the here and now. In the beatitudes, Jesus is calling each of us to be a peacemaker within our own communities, so those communities might be the catalyst for change on a larger scale.

If we were to revise the Beatitudes and update this sacred text in our modern context and language, I believe that this verse would read "To be on the right path, you must be an Every Day Advocate, for they are the co-creators of peace."

Being a peacemaker is not making big systematic changes against racism, sexual assault, gun violence and white supremacy. Peacemaking is about everyone doing their part to make the small cultural shifts so that together we can build a community that is awake, alive, aware, and engaged. In the beatitudes, Jesus is calling on us to co-create the peace of God within ourselves, our communities, in the natural world. He calls on each one of us to do our part in this project, this human project, to make the unequivocal statement that violence and exploitation are not ok and it will not be tolerated in this community.

The Greek word *eirenopoio* that is used in this verse, is traditionally translated as "peacemaker." However, it is thought to be better understood as Peace-Worker,

implying not merely making peace between those who are embroiled in a conflict but those working in the committed process to create peace as a way of life. The peace that is manifested in God's Kingdom. Here, Jesus lays out his manifesto, that to be in a relationship with God, we have to be co-creators of peace. That we, just as Jesus was, have to be engaged a continual process of peace work; sometimes painful and discomfoting discernment process that asks, How do my actions, exploit, harm, or diminish life, and then takes the right actions to correct the problems in this time and place.

Alia Wong wrote in the Atlantic that "The aftermath of a mass shooting in the United States can feel like an all-too-familiar play."

Act I: Some combination of grief and shock and terror ripples across the nation, accompanied by a deluge of news coverage.

Act II: Gun-control advocates leverage the moment to call for stricter laws; those who oppose such restrictions offer their thoughts and prayers to victims but argue that gun control won't help.

Act III: the inevitable deadlock. America moves on; America forgets. Nothing changes, except for those for whom everything has changed. Public opinion on gun control remains as divided as ever.

Wong continues "This American Tragedy has played out in a countless number of schools, movie theaters, nightclubs and concert venues. This time the folks in Parkland Florida are following a different script. The curtain has stayed up on Act II, as survivors of what is now the deadliest high-school shooting in modern U.S. history have prevented the play from proceeding along its typical trajectory."

Emma Gonzalez – a brown, bald, queer, Latinx – courageously entered the public sphere with her speech at a rally the Saturday following the shooting "Every single person up here today" she said "all these people should be home grieving. But instead we are up here standing together because if all our government and President can do is send thoughts and prayers, then it's time for the victims to be the change that we need to see....It's time to start doing something, we are going to be the kids that you read about in the textbook....We are prepared to call B. S.!"

The young people of Parkland, Florida have become everyday advocates, not just for their own lives, but for my life, your life for all of our lives. Through their bold and courageous actions, they have become peacemakers and they have inspired a nation millions of young people to become everyday advocates in their own communities. We can take a lesson from these young people. They have not formed a committee to study the issue and report back with recommendations, nor did they take the time to write a well-crafted, perfectly word-smithed, letter or email. They have taken their raw emotions: outrage and grief and have engaged in their community, they have board buses, traveled all night to demand action face to face

with their representatives. They have spoken emotionally and authentically at the status quo. These are the Children of God, co-creating peace right here and right now.

In the beatitudes and the texts we heard this morning, Jesus is calling into right action. He is not saying “If you believe this..., you will go to heaven” nor is he saying, “if you have this correct theology or ideology you are holier than another”. In the Gospels and specifically in the beatitudes, Jesus wants his followers to be awake, aware, alive and engaged in the world, to be on the right path — God’s Path.

In his writings on the Beatitudes, Theologian Richard Rohr weaves a narrative that “Bad” people didn’t kill Jesus; conventional wisdom crucified him. Jesus taught an alternative wisdom instead of the maintenance of social order. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is anything but maintaining the status quo!”

The young people of Parkland, Florida and the Millions across our nation who have raised their voices, marched, protested, and demanded action are not settling for the three acts of the American Tragedy and neither should we. They are defying the status quo, the systems of power that seek to exploit and capitalize on life. And much like the disciples, who had the audacity to follow Jesus and his radical new paradigm, they are being persecuted because of their quest for justice.

But according to Jesus, persecution might just be a sign that we are doing something right: Blessed are you who are persecuted in the name of righteousness, for yours in the Kingdom of God.

Richard Rohr writes that “we should not be surprised that this Beatitude follows the previous ones. Persecution for the cause of justice is inevitable.” This is part of our human experience when you speak truth to power and defy the status quo. It is difficult and you have to be courageous because they will try and knock you down and suppress your voice every step of the way.

John Lewis had the courage to speak truth to power. This everyday advocate was the youngest of the Big Six civil rights leaders as chairman of SNCC the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee from 1963 to 1966, some of the most tumultuous years of the Civil Rights Movement. on March 7, 1965 – a day that would become known as "Bloody Sunday" – Lewis and fellow activist Hosea Williams led over 600 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. At the end of the bridge, they were met by Alabama State Troopers who ordered them to disperse. When the marchers stopped to pray, the police discharged tear gas and mounted troopers charged the demonstrators, beating them with nightsticks. Lewis's skull was fractured, but he escaped across the bridge to Brown Chapel. Before Lewis could be taken to the hospital, he appeared before the television cameras calling on President Johnson to intervene in Alabama. Lewis bears scars from the incident on his head that are still visible today.

Jesus knew that his new paradigm was a dangerous proposition. He knew that the path he was proposing: speaking truth to power, prioritizing the marginalized and outcasts above the privileged and elite; and disrupting the status quo would eventually lead to his death. He knew this way of life would not be easy for those who chose to be his disciples. That it took courage.

Continuing with our updated version of the Beatitudes this final verse might read something like... Those of you who speak truth to power, you are on the right path, you will part of the Beloved Community.

John Lewis knew how dangerous it was to be part of this movement of peacemaking..."We were determined not to let any act of violence keep us from our goal. We knew our lives could be threatened, but we had made up our minds not to turn back," John Lewis was building the Beloved Community, where each person has a full and equal voice; a place where life is allowed to expand and flourish to its fullest potential.

As we have seen again and again over the last few weeks, the beatitudes are Jesus' script in an upside-down world. These blessings give us the glimpse of what life can be and offer hope in the midst of brokenness and longing. Jesus shows us a world that radically turns our world right side up and puts us on the right path. The Beatitudes describe a radical new paradigm that promotes the expansion of life, love, and justice over power, greed, and self-interest. Jesus is giving us the vision of a new way to live a new world, a new community of people who are aware and engaged in the present moment. This is the beloved community where every person has the opportunity to flourish to their full potential, to be active and engaged in a world where life is recognized and celebrated. A balanced community we are in right relationship with one another, the natural world, and God.

This new world that Jesus reveals in the Beatitudes is not yet born. We are called to create it, to give painful birth to it, to drag it out of ourselves, kicking and screaming, through every day acts of love and grace.

Amen