



And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13, NRSV)

**Together in Christ: An Easter Season Study on Beloved
Community**

A Radical Inclusion and Racial Justice Resource

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Preface

My beloved Wisconsin siblings in Christ, I offer this ~~Lenten~~ Easter Season Bible Study as a gift for thought, for reflection, for meditation, and for deep conversation. I understand that this is not an easy study for many. It challenges our beliefs and perceptions. It deals with some unpleasant and difficult issues. It has potential to offend and discomfort. And for all these reasons, it is very important that we explore it together.

Our Council of Bishops made Dismantling Racism a priority initiative for our leadership in The United Methodist Church. The devastating impact of ongoing institutional and cultural racism prevents us from truly living God's will for unity in beloved community. We want to invite as many people as possible into the examination of causes and symptoms of racial injustice in our world.

This study was written in collaboration with my assistant, Dan Dick, who worked with me to outline and develop the concepts and format. He prepared this study with helpful review and feedback from Carrie Riesen and Edelira Huertas, two lay people with a heart and passion for peace and justice. Barbara Dick provided careful editing, and our Director of Communications designed, formatted, and produced the curriculum. A project like this takes a team, and this team worked with me to offer this excellent study.



Bishop Hee-Soo Jun

First Sunday of Easter

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’ (Genesis 9:8-17)

Covenant is a central theme of our Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Multiple times, God established covenants with human beings, which essentially held a few simple elements: 1) I will be your God, 2) you will be my people, 3) under the condition that you will be obedient and faithful to your God, and 4) doing to others as you would have done to yourself.

Frequently, when God established covenants, human beings accepted and agreed to them; human beings then broke the covenant and separated from God (sin); prophets called people to repentance; God reestablished covenant (redemption), and the cycle repeated itself. The grand culmination of this covenantal relationship was (and is) Jesus. Through Jesus the Christ, the cycle was broken, and the restoration and deliverance of God’s people was sealed for all time.

Note that, with Noah, the covenant is between “me and all the flesh that is on the earth.” We know that shortly after this covenant was established, Noah got himself drunk, and his son Ham violated the moral code of his time and received a curse (Genesis 9:18-28). The naming of Ham’s descendants in chapter 10 have led some questionable scholars to note that many of the darker-skinned ethnicities in our world today emerged as the lineage of Ham. This sad misinterpretation resulted in a terrible abuse of scripture: a bias and prejudice against brown and black skin on a supposedly biblical basis, used to justify slavery.

An important question to consider is this: does the curse of Noah invalidate the promise of God? God’s intention to protect all living creatures on the face of the earth is crystal clear. Are our earthly disagreements and divisions greater than the will of God? I pray this is a rhetorical question.

In the midst of the global pandemic and the multiple incidents of violence and brutal force against black people throughout 2020 and before, the Council of Bishops of The United

Methodist Church met and committed to a priority of Dismantling Racism. We do this not to be judgmental or political. While there are aggressive and violently racist people, there is also widespread agreement among Christians that such prejudice and bigotry is not acceptable. The Council of Bishops is more interested in dismantling the systemic nature of racial, ethnic, and cultural injustice and ongoing harmful ignorance. This will help us reconstruct systems of equity, fairness, acceptance, celebration, and justice for “all flesh that is on the earth.” It is vitally important that we make every effort to order our lives and our ministries to contribute to God’s divine plan for beloved community and to see “God’s will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,” which we pray regularly in the Lord’s Prayer.

Thoughts, words, and actions that treat people of other colors, cultures, languages, ethnicities, or geographies as inferior, dangerous, repulsive, or contemptible based on their differences is sinful and destructive. These attitudes disrespect and disgrace the truth that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and we should spend significant time together in our communities of faith working hard to eliminate prejudice, divisive judgmentalism, and oppression wherever we find it.

Questions for Conversation

1. What characteristics, qualities, and behaviors do I tend to judge other people on? What meets with my approval? What causes disapproval?
2. Where did these standards of judgment come from?
3. How does a person’s skin color influence my thinking? How does their ability to speak my primary language clearly influence my thinking?
4. What sights, smells, sounds (think of clothing, cooking, music, decorations, hygiene, tone/volume/inflection, etc.) are most comfortable for you? Which make you uncomfortable or irritated?

Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. Where do I encounter people who are significantly different from me?
2. What are the characteristics of my family, friends, and the people I associate with most frequently that I find most comfortable, confirming, and “normal”? What characteristics and actions make me most uncomfortable, uncertain, and threatened?
3. What obstacles and/or challenges do I feel about relating to people who think, speak, or act in ways foreign to my own thoughts, words, and actions?

Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

Creator God, we offer our thanks and praise that we are part of your divine creation. Help us to view “all flesh that is on earth” as you view it. Open our eyes and hearts to see the beauty, the sacredness, the holiness, and the wonder of all you have created. We ask this humbly in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

Book:

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson. Understanding our inequalities based in power dynamics and abuses of power large and small that divide us.

Film:

Twelve Years a Slave by Steve McQueen. Warning: graphic and disturbing, not easy to watch; the story of a man sold into slavery and the abuses of power and oppression that illuminate most of human history.

Second Sunday of Easter

You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it. (Psalm 22:23-31)

Where God is concerned, *all* is a prominent and primary word. All flesh, all the world, all who sleep, all the families, all the nations, all who live; these are a glimpse of God's view and vision for the world. All people are valuable in the sight of God. For us? Not so much. This is one of our greatest challenges and opportunities: to create the kind of beloved community that reflects God's will and plan for humanity. Yes, there are differences. Yes, there are disagreements and divisions. But the grace and love of God is greater than anything we can come up with to create division and disunity.

The Council of Bishops has been reflecting on work done by lawyer and social justice activist, Bryan Stevenson, who offers a powerful vision in a video titled *The Power of Proximity* (<https://youtu.be/1RyAwZIH04Y>). Mr. Stevenson identifies four principles he believes can equip us to dismantle existing systems and policies of racism, and assist us in creating a more inclusive, just, and equitable society for all. Our bishops have responded positively to this message because it parallels, very closely, core Wesleyan principles upon which our

denomination is based. For the next four weeks of our Easter journey, we will explore Bryan Stevenson's principles and reflect on how they might impact our congregations, our communities, our country, and our world.

The four principles are:

1. Move toward pain, injury, and harm—it is impossible to address or improve a situation by avoiding it.
2. Create space for the narratives of integrity and truth while resisting narratives of fear and division/othering—the less we know about others, the less we value them.
3. Live as people of relentless hope—believe the best about others instead of the worst. Live toward a potential for good rather than an avoidance of assumed bad.
4. Be willing to be discomforted in order to be faithful witnesses—remember that our discipleship is obedience to God and gospel, not comfort and security. Disciples are sent, often to places they would not ordinarily choose to go!

Physical therapists and personal fitness trainers often encourage counter-intuitive advice: lean into the pain. Why would we want to do this? Most of us do anything we can think of to avoid pain, to relieve pain. Leaning into the pain has very limited appeal to most of us. But what therapists and trainers understand is the wisdom behind the cliché, “no pain, no gain.” To strengthen and repair muscle, to lose weight and increase muscle mass, to improve the function of heart and lungs, requires that we not only tolerate some discomfort but also embrace some necessary pain.

Extending this metaphor beyond the physical to the emotional and spiritual, leaving our comfort zones and opening ourselves to growing self-awareness and empathy with others is painful and at times threatening. Yet, it is only through entering into the lived reality of others that we can escape ignorance and grow in loving acceptance. As we learn, we care more. As we care more, we are more accepting. As our hearts open in care and acceptance, we are able to learn more, creating a personal process for development and transformation. Our Christian scriptures offer us a firm foundation upon which to build: a willingness to share God's love and to witness to God's grace to “all the ends of the earth.”

It is too easy to hear the complaints of strangers and to dismiss them or reject them, especially when they confront and challenge our own experience and normative perspective. People from a dominant white group may hear the shouts of “black lives matter,” or “give us our children” from minorities and immigrants and feel defensive walls go up. Why are “they” acting like this? Why do “they” protest or demonstrate or loot? Why don't “they” settle down and act

like “normal” people? If any of these thoughts have ever gone through your mind, I invite you to step back and think about what they really mean.

Every time we think in terms of “we/they” or “us/them,” we are engaging in *normativity* thinking. Please hear that this is not true only for Caucasian/white people about other races. Ibram X. Kendi points out in *How to Be an Antiracist* that this is true of every person in a particular racial group making assumptions of the motivations, thinking, and actions of any other racial group. It is a normal, unconscious, function of our human nature. But as with many destructive and unhelpful aspects of our human nature, Christ calls us to rise above and return to the intention and will of God. Together, in Christian community and support, we can become better.

The vision of God’s will cast for us by Jesus and Paul is not “we/they” but “all of us together.” Paul asserts that, through Jesus the Christ, all the dividing walls of hostility and separation have been broken down. Unity, even unity to the point of becoming one body, the incarnate body of Christ, is the intention and expectation of God. This is absolutely impossible if we allow things like skin color, language, cultural mores, and guiding core values to divide us. This does not mean we simply tolerate others, but that we come to accept and value them.

Questions for Conversation

1. What activities are you personally, and your church collectively, engaged in that proclaim and model the love of God and the mercy to those in need for all people?
2. What are some simple and practical ways that you do or could learn more about people who are different from you?
3. Empathy is an essential element of leaning into the pain of others. How can we cultivate a culture of empathy that allows us to truly hear the pain of people who experience bigotry, prejudice, violence, oppression, and intolerance in their lived reality?

Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. What are the ideas, behaviors, words, and beliefs that cause you to take offense?
2. What ideas, behaviors, words, and beliefs do you employ that might cause others to take offense?
3. When have you experienced judgment, condemnation, prejudice, or misrepresentation in your life? What do you do to make sure you don’t cause others to experience the same?

Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

God of glory, shine your light in us and through us. Infuse our thoughts, our words and beliefs, and our actions with your divine grace, and your transformative love. May we never harm or hurt through what we say, do, and think. Allow us to see others as you see them, and to know others as you know them. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

Book:

How to Be an Anti-Racist by Ibram X. Kendi. A well-presented invitation to become actively anti-racist instead of passively opposing racism.

Film:

Eyes on the Prize. Stunning documentary from the perspective of those who lived and fought for civil rights in this country. One of the best examples of “leaning into the pain.”

Third Sunday of Easter

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

God’s vision of one creation, one world, one harmonious family of humankind seems impossible to many people—especially to those who build walls, create division, and call for separation and exclusion. For many, unconditional love, unmerited grace, reconciliation between enemies, joyous acceptance of the immigrant and stranger, and racial equity and equality, make no sense whatsoever. God’s great wisdom is foolishness in the eyes of many people who have never experienced the love of Christ in their own lives. But for those who follow Jesus and have listened to the Apostle Paul, God’s wisdom is the greatest truth of all. It is our privilege and task to help God’s wisdom make sense to a foolish and prejudiced world.

Bryan Stevenson’s second principle for creating a more just and inclusive world is: “create space for the narratives of integrity and truth while resisting narratives of fear and division/othinging.” Through normativity, most of us define truth as that which makes the most sense to us, personally. This means that we create a subjective truth based on what we have learned, experienced, seen, desired, and understood. What is true for us is real and valid; but it is not necessarily true for anyone else. This also means that what is true for others is equally real and valid. We all have a story—a narrative—that describes and explains what we “know”; what we believe and think and assume and use to make sense of reality. The creation of beloved community requires us to make space where our personal stories, narratives, and truths can be shared.

Being open to hear stories is in our nature. Human beings are story-forming, storytelling, story-listening creatures. Stories shape us. Stories form us. And stories define us. But stories can be changed. The more stories we collect, the wider, broader, and deeper is our understanding of the world. We all have personal and family stories. We broaden our stories to include friends and neighborhoods and schools or workplaces. Our communities are collections of stories and a story of their own. As our awareness and understanding of more and more people expands, our worldview and our normativity expands. As we live, our circle of “us”

expands, and the unknown territory of “them” contracts. Throughout our lives, we can continue to expand our circle of “us” to include “all of us.” This is foolishness to a world that defines itself by haves and have-nots, the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, the good and the evil.

It is not easy to stand firm in God’s vision of one universal humankind. While God views our similarities, human beings look to differences. Where God sees beauty, we look for flaws. Where God calls creation “good,” we seek to find fault. This is the essence of our fallen nature and our separation from God. Sin is not simply doing wrong things; sin is refusing to see the creation through the eyes of God. It is our separation from God’s intention and will. When we repent—when we turn back to God’s vision for reconciliation and unity of all people—we restore ourselves to the covenantal relationship God desires.

There are some individuals and groups who will never be open to full inclusion and equality in this lifetime. Money, power, popularity, influence, fear, and self-interest are formidable motivators that have nothing to do with faith, but they continue to exert unquestionable influence in our world. Things like humility, kindness, compassion, mercy, generosity, gentleness, and forgiveness—all qualities of faithful Christian discipleship and mandates to us from God—are viewed by many as weakness, vulnerability, or idiocy. The wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God are very different things.

Many of us may experience resistance, annoyance, even offense at charges of racism and discrimination. It may feel unfair and prejudicial in return. However, this feeling comes from the fact that we are not connected, not relating, not involved. When we are actively engaged in listening to each other’s stories and narratives, we cannot help but discover ways that other lives have been damaged, violated, and oppressed by our own normativity; our reality is not the reality of everyone else.

It is critically important that we share our own stories, but not just with those who are most like us. We must share with those very different from us; we must be open to hear others’ stories; and most important, we must be willing to be changed by these stories. We may never intend to hurt or harm another person, but it is critical that we actually hear from people who have experienced hurt or harm.

Questions for Conversation

1. Some of the qualities that our world deems foolishness are defined by Paul (in Galatians 5:22-23) as the fruit of God’s Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How does racial discrimination and injustice undermine our ability to live fully from the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit?
2. Whom do you listen to? Do you listen mostly to those people and sources that agree with and confirm what you already know and believe? What sources and

people do you listen to who challenge what you think and offer alternative perspectives to your own?

3. What opportunities could you create to listen to stories and narratives very different from your own?

Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. What is your vision of a “perfect world”? Who belongs? Who doesn’t? Why?
2. What are the core elements of your own story? What people, experiences, and learnings have contributed to the person you are today?
3. Where do you feel you have the greatest need to grow, to learn, and to change?

Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

Almighty God, you are a God of story, and we are a people of story. The scriptures teach us many things about the evolution of belief and faith, covenantal relationship and obedience, and the need to grow. Our spiritual formation is a deepening of our understanding of you and your will. You created all the people on this earth. Help us to develop a deep hunger and need to know as much about others as we possibly can. We ask this in the name and spirit of the Christ. Amen.

Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

Book:

My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies by Resmaa Menakem. Powerful exploration through narrative and reflection on the ongoing impact of racism in our culture.

Film:

I Am Not Your Negro by Raoul Peck. Powerful and insightful documentary that bridges James Baldwin’s unfinished work, *Remember This House*, through black history to #BlackLivesMatter today.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’ (John 3:14-21)

John 3:16 is one of the most beloved, revered, and well-known of all New Testament passages. It is great assurance to those who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior; and it is strong motivation to live our lives in a way that will be attractive to those who do not yet believe. The gift and promise of eternal life is not a personal or individual prize but a naming of the reality and desire of God: that the whole world might be reconciled to the love of God. We live in a world where, metaphorically, people are deeply embedded and invested in darkness. It is the purpose of all Christian disciples to share and spread God’s light to everyone we can.

In both a practical and a literal sense, this means that we absolutely cannot engage in such things as racism, sexism, classism, caste-ism, border-ism, politicism, and dozens of other *isms* that divide, judge, separate, and do harm. Skin color, education level, language, cultural preferences are irrelevant; all means all. God so loves the *whole world* that those who are obedient to God can do no less.

We can never control what others think, what they might believe, how they might act, or essentially who they are. What is within our control are our thoughts, intentions, desires, and actions. Those of us who truly love Christ and seek to be faithful in our discipleship will be open, kind, generous, and caring of others, including those most different from ourselves. As Christians, we have no choice in the matter; if we love Jesus, we will show it in the way we treat other people (see Matthew 25:31-46).

This reality and commitment is at the heart of the Council of Bishop’s vision to Dismantle Racism. It guides our understanding that racism is sin. This is biblically and theologically supported, though Christian believers have found ways to perpetuate bias and prejudice throughout the ages. For some, human judgment trumps divine grace at every turn.

But we can no longer perpetuate poor theology and bad scriptural interpretation. Rather than selecting a few biblical passages to support our prejudices and fears, it is vitally important that we view the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as a whole, an intricate tapestry of varied and diverse threads God and God's people have woven together to describe God's will and create an image of beloved community, the very realm (kingdom/kin*dom) of God.

We may think that our responsibility ends with our family, our work, or our community. From time to time, we may take responsibility for our state and country. But John reminds us of God's intention that we expand and extend our responsibility to the world, to all people in all places. It is our sacred task and call to shine God's light to every person we possibly can, individually and with others. God so loves this world that God wants light, and love, and grace, and hope to be extended to the ends of the earth.

Bryan Stevenson's third point is that we "strive to live as a people of relentless hope." This is a wonderful call to service and action. It echoes the sentiment Paul raised in 2 Corinthians 5:7: "we walk by faith, not by sight." When we walk by sight, seeing all the hurt and violence, despair and destruction in our world, it is easy to lose hope. When, through faith, we commit ourselves to a relentless and abiding hope, nothing we see with our eyes can defeat us. Motivate us, yes, but defeat us, no. When we see racial violence, ethnic discrimination, immigrant oppression, class prejudice, economic injustice, and bigoted acts of hatred, we must be motivated to act. And there is no more powerful motivator than hope. Hope for peace, hope for equity and equality, hope for civility and respect, hope for justice. But this hope may never be passive or abstract. Hope must be a hope for a Promised Land, for a new reality, for a new beginning. Too many people have been victims of systems of prejudice and oppression that robbed them of any and all hope. Hope only for some is corrupt. Unless hope extends to all, it denies the will and purposes of God.

We are called to be agents of light and hope. We have been entrusted with gifts from God, and we have been the fortunate and blessed recipients of God's love and grace. Jesus' call to discipleship is a mandate to take all that we have been given to share with others. Should we deny any person—for any reason—access to God's grace and love, Jesus will have nothing to do with us (Matthew 7:21-23).

Relentless hope is difficult (if not impossible) for individuals to sustain. This is why we have the gift of Christian community. Together we are greater than the sum of our parts (we create *synergy*), and together we enjoy a strength and support we must have in order to realize relentless hope. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:13 that "Faith, hope and love [charity] abide," and while the greatest is love, the three exist in a dynamic and generative relationship. When we dwell in the intersection of faith, hope, and love, there is simply no place for discrimination, prejudice, judgment, and condemnation.

Questions for Conversation

1. Share what you think and feel when you hear the term “relentless hope.” What impact might it have on our lives to live with “relentless hope”?
2. How do you define “unconditional love”? Who do you believe/wonder might exist outside of God’s unconditional love?
3. In what ways can we—individually and in our communities of faith—extend the love, grace, mercy, and justice of God to others?

Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. What are the situations and experiences you are most likely to avoid in your life? Why?
2. When do you feel motivated to leave your own comfort zone? What have been the results of such experiences?
3. What gives you hope? What challenges and threatens your sense of hope? What do you do about it?

Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

God of love and hope, encourage us and strengthen us to be agents of love and hope for others. Inspire us to understand and experience world-loving hope and goodwill. Never allow us to choose who in our world might need your love; but help us to assume that every person needs your love and grace. We praise you, Lord. Amen.

Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

Book:

Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation by Jennifer Harvey. A clear explanation of the need for reparations and restoration as foundation for building a hopeful future for all.

Film:

Just Mercy by Destin Daniel Cretton. True story of Bryan Stephenson’s defense of a man on death row, despite evidence of his innocence. A difficult look at the racial injustice at work in the United States penal system.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ (John 20:20-23)

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, ‘Is it not written,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations”?

But you have made it a den of robbers.’

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. (Mark 11:15-18)

As Christians, we are granted an incredible amount of responsibility and power that we sometimes misunderstand. Jesus tells his disciples that they have the power to forgive or deny forgiveness, but that they should use this discernment very carefully and faithfully (John 20:23). Jesus also models for us that, when we witness sacrilegious behavior, we need to act (Mark 11:15-16). God’s truth is to be actively lived out in the beliefs and behaviors of Christ’s disciples.

Often, when we hear the commandment, “you shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15), we think in terms of material possessions. But there are many other significant ways we steal from others. Gossip steals another’s reputation. Lying steals trust. We can steal another person’s dignity, self-esteem, security, nobility, and self-respect by words and actions. Messages of “you don’t belong,” “you’re stupid,” “go back where you came from,” “speak English,” “take a bath,” and other derogatory insults do great harm, and are real forms of stealing. Stealing, in all its forms, is injustice, violence, and oppression.

Any time a dominant culture makes minority cultures feel unwelcome, disrespected, inferior, defective, or humiliated, it is stealing from that minority culture. Any time a member of a dominant culture engages in a like manner toward a member or group of a minority culture, they are doing harm, violence, and oppression to them.

Modern biblical scholarship notes a shift from Hebrew scriptures to the Christian scriptures in the scope of God’s instructions and will. Most of what we call the Old Testament explains the covenant God held with the Chosen People, the Children of Israel, the Jewish faith. However, in Christ, the scope of the covenant became universal and inclusive; God is God of all.

The ethnic prejudice, cultural divisions, and tribal animosity intrinsic to the Law and the Prophets were all broken down through Christ Jesus. Reconciliation and universal invitation to confess Christ opened salvation to the entire earth. God so loved the WORLD.

But the world is a big, big place, and most of us occupy only a small part of it. What we don't know, experience, encounter, and understand about our world is significantly greater than what we do know. The world can be a scary place, filled with things we don't understand. Bryan Stevenson's fourth principle of a more just and equitable world is "be willing to be discomforted in order to be faithful witnesses."

Normally, people avoid things that make them uncomfortable. We like things that are familiar and help us feel comfortable and secure. We listen to news outlets that reinforce and confirm what we already believe; we read books and watch programs that resonate with the things we like, we gravitate toward favorite foods, music, hobbies, clothing, and people we most enjoy; and we keep as much to ourselves as we can. We do the things we choose to do gladly; we resist doing the things we are told we *ought* to do by others. We love to feel a sense of control over what happens to us. It makes one wonder why anyone becomes Christian, because God clearly has other ideas for us.

It is clear that the followers of Jesus were asked to do things they would rather not have done. In fact, many drifted away and ceased following Jesus when they realized what it would cost (see John 6:66). Standing up for what is right is sometimes unpopular and even dangerous. John Wesley often asked of early Methodists what they were willing to give to serve Jesus, even asking if they were willing to give their very lives. However, Wesley was also quick to assert, "No matter what, God is with us," which is at the heart of the liturgy of John Wesley's covenant service. Here is John Wesley's traditional Covenant Prayer (United Methodist Hymnal #607):

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.

This is the declaration of faith we are invited to make as United Methodist Christian disciples each and every day. It is a voluntary pledge to leave our comfort zones and meet people who are different, strange, foreign, perhaps difficult to understand, and maybe even a little threatening. Yet, there is not a person walking this earth that God does not want us to care for, to love, to engage, to invite, and to get to know. And the only way we can get to know others is to share stories.

Every person on this earth is unique; paradoxically, it is the one thing we all have in common. As unique as each of us is, we actually have more similarities than differences, but we can discover this truth only by talking with each other. It is very easy to be prejudiced against a category, a label, a faceless other, an undefined mass. This all changes when we meet people one-on-one, face-to-face. People stop being statistics, demographics, target audiences, and stereotypes; they become real, live, flesh-and-blood siblings. We open our normativity to include a new normal. We expand our circle. This happens only when we are willing to be discomforted in order to be faithful witnesses for Christ.

There is a real power and grace in Christian community as we think about engaging with others; we never have to do it alone. It may feel overwhelmingly threatening to go out alone to meet new people, especially people we perceive to be significantly different. This is why Jesus sent disciples out two-by-two. Joined together, we are given support, security, and safety. But it is also important not to overwhelm. When one group “gangs up” on another (e.g., a majority group on a minority group), we create unfair and undermining tokenism. Many of our best intercultural and inclusive intentions break down in the expectation that minority individuals should join large, dominant groups.

Questions for Conversation

1. What new experiences have you had with people different from yourself? What experiences has our church congregation offered to interact with people different from the majority membership?
2. What efforts can we make to reach out to people who are different? What resources can we use to bridge differences and build understanding?
3. What is the cultural, ethnic, and social diversity present in our community? How can we deepen our understanding of and relationships with people not represented in our faith community?

Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. In our Gospels and throughout the New Testament, the Jesus movement was the minority population, and it met resistance and oppression in many forms in its earliest days. Today, many Christians feel that Christianity no longer holds the respect and prominence it once did. Why do you think this is so? Where has

Christianity failed to tell its story well? Where is it failing to connect with the story of others?

2. Where have you witnessed injustice or oppression that motivated you to get involved? What motivates you to step up and get actively engaged in work for justice, equality, compassion, and unity?
3. Where do you process your thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about other cultures, ethnicities, races, classes, and castes? How diverse are these encounters?

Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

Lord of all creation, we cannot begin to comprehend the immensity of all that exists, all you have made, and all that you love. We are truly humbled, and we confess that we too often avoid that which is strange and different. We love our comfort, and we need to repent our complacency. Help us to see the foreigner and the stranger and the other as beloved gifts from you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

Book:

The Cross and the Lynching Tree by James Cone. Discomforting, but powerful theological reflection on the parallels between the crucifixion of Christ and the lynching of black men and women throughout our history.

Film:

Fruitvale Station by Ryan Coogler. True story of a 22-year-old loving father and beloved son on the last day of his life before being gunned down on New Year's Day 2009.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!’

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!’

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

(John 12:12-16)

How do you envision the triumphal entry of Jesus and the disciples into Jerusalem? The majority of Hollywood film depictions offer a crowd of homogenous, white crowds of people. Such images have power and influence. Most of us already envision biblical stories through our normative lenses, with white people seeing most of the participants in the stories as looking like white people. Even many people with other skin tones and colors describe primarily white, Western crowds when asked about images of Holy Week. Historically, virtually no one at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem would have looked like a northern European or American white person.

The gathering on the first Palm Sunday would have been richly diverse and colorful. Olive, coffee, caramel, ebony, beige, amber, ruddy, cocoa, coral, bronze, and ivory, and a host of other hues and shades populated the road, shouting “Hosanna.” All the differences among these people were irrelevant in the face of adoration and praise for Jesus. We need to learn this lesson today.

Our United Methodist Communion liturgy (Word and Table Service, United Methodist Hymnal p. 10) asks God, “By your Spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” *Oneness* transcends every difference, especially the least significant difference such as skin color, education, income level, or political preference. Through baptism, most of our lives are consecrated shortly after birth to inclusive, non-restrictive unity in Christ. Once bound to the body of Christ through this baptism, no force on earth can separate us from it, unless we choose amputation from the body for ourselves. Our prejudices and judgmentalism are meaningless in the face of God’s love and grace. But it is incredibly important in our witness to the world that we dismantle and eliminate discrimination, prejudice, oppression, and ethnic violence in all forms.

Why did so many people come out to celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry? Scanning the crowd, it would be difficult to find someone who was not poor. Everyone under Roman rule experienced some form of oppression, and many endured violence. Most experienced freedom of religious observance, but with obeisance demanded by Caesar. Literacy and education were denied to the majority. Most were trade people living hand to mouth, village by village, and few had hope for improvement or a comfortable life. Survival was a communal concern; every individual was dependent on the goodness and sharing of others to live. Strangers were welcomed, both by tradition and by practical concern. Every new hand contributed to the well-being of the whole. Forgiveness of enemies was not an idealistic conceit but a practical need.

In our growing global community, there is less and less room for enemies and strangers. The more we know one another, the greater and deeper will be our understanding, and the better off we all will be. What is true for our world is very much true for our local communities and neighborhoods. So many people live in fear, under clouds of darkness and despair. Xenophobia—fear of strangers—has become a core value in some groups in our United States. It must not be a value in our United Methodist Church. There is a Greek phrase, *κάτω από το δέρμα*, that translates, “under the skin,” and means at our “core essence,” at the depths of our being. Christians are one “under the skin,” which means that there is absolutely no defense for discrimination based on skin color. It may take some retraining and reframing to stop seeing color differences as a primary criterion for judgment, but it is essential we do so.

In modern Western culture, we forget that much of the discrimination against Jesus was ethnic, social, class, caste, and economic rather than religious. He was born into a poor family in an occupied region, with few prospects for escape, viewed by Roman leadership as inferior and beneath contempt. He would have been considered a troublemaker and rabble rouser. Even among the Jewish religious elite, he was reviled. He would be the person that most members of dominant culture would make every effort to avoid. This should make us pause in our reflection.

Jesus would not be like most of us. Jesus would be the stranger. Jesus would be the outsider. Jesus would be the protestor, the demonstrator, the rebel. Jesus would be the minority.

Those of us who are members of the dominant culture would be the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Roman soldiers, the provincial governors; the ones to be embarrassed and perhaps a little afraid of this disruptive Nazorean.

It is also worth noting that many New Testament scholars' conjecture that some of the very people who lauded Jesus with Hosannas on Palm Sunday turned around and called for his crucifixion later the same week. This illuminates the reality that we are not always consistent in our faith and in our ability to understand and do God's will. We sometimes proclaim with our mouths something very different from the way we behave. Most of us have no problem proclaiming that God is love; it is in our ability to share God's love that we find the greatest challenge.

Questions for Conversation

1. We wave our palm branches in the safety and comfort of our church sanctuaries. What would motivate us to take to the streets to proclaim Christ's gospel of love, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and peace?
2. What is your greatest obstacle to reaching out to different people: skin color, language, economic level, educational level, politics, religion, or something else? How can we work together to help overcome it?
3. What specific things might we do within our fellowship to make it easier to reach out to other cultures, ethnicities, language groups, and economic realities?

Questions for Personal Reflection between Sessions

1. What will you do this week to prepare and fully engage in the journey through Holy Week? (A devotional guide for individuals is included with this study.)
2. What does the phrase "unity in diversity" mean to you? How do we honor and value cultural, ethnic, and racial differences while working for unity and oneness?
3. What are some of the things you wish you better understood about people of other cultures, nations, ethnicities, and lived realities? What can you do to find out?

Closing Prayer (or one of your own):

We shout our praises and adoration for your Son, O Lord, and we mean what we say. Yet we find it hard to align our actions with our best intentions. We need your help to bridge the gap between our intentions and our behaviors. Bless us with a love that is not abstract, but real; a faith that builds bridges instead of walls. We ask this humbly, O God. Amen.

Recommended Resources for Deeper Learning and Understanding:

Book:

Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community by Martin Luther King, Jr. One of King's last published books raises and explores the question that is still before us today.

Film:

Whose Streets? by Sabaah Folayan & Damon Davis. In the wake of the Ferguson protests, the battle was no longer limited to "civil" rights, but the right to live.

