

Sermon by Bishop Charles W. Jordan,

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May 6, 2000

Let us pray. Gracious God, embue this humble servant with your Spirit. Surround this your gathered people with your grace, and that together what we do will be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It was late on a Sunday morning last Fall. The meeting of the General Board of Church and Society. The meeting had adjourned. And during that meeting we had a computer that calculated, moment by moment, the 32,000 children that die around the world each day from preventable causes, such as starvation, disease, war. The numbers, of course, quickly changed while we met those days, but they were visible during the plenary. But now the meeting was over and I happened to be the last person to leave that room. But the computer was still on. The numbers were still going, and so I went over and turned off the computer. Walked out of the room but still knowing that though there was nothing on the screen, the numbers still went on.

You know there is an excellent resource which is produced by our four program boards for the Bishop's Initiative on Children in Poverty entitled "A Church for All God's Children." I know most of you have used this in your local congregations. We sing, you know, the familiar songs, that familiar song rather, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." All the children: abused, neglected, hungry, homeless, diseased, victims of war, orphaned by AIDS. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

The writer of John's first letter which was read for us, and I just want to repeat some of those words. "Be loved, let us love one another, because love is from God; every one who loves is born of God and knows God. Who ever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we love God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

And in the Gospel of John those familiar words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." The world and everybody in it. The supreme gift of love that we might live through him, that we might love because God loved and loves.

Reginald Fuller, who is perhaps best known for his biblical commentaries on the lectionary, has said that "God is love" is a confession of faith from those who have encountered the love of God in Jesus Christ. The love of God in Jesus Christ. God's gift of love was a gift of reconciliation, a gift of salvation, a gift of power, to a world possessed by sin,

alienated from God. A world whose people not only needed salvation but needed it in the form of human presence, human words and deeds.

That gift was a gift of the awareness of the need for us to love as we have been loved. It was a gift that in exercise of the response reminds us of God's predisposition to the poor. There are 35,000,000, over 35,000,000 people in poverty in the United States. In the past generation the gap between the haves and the have nots has increased and continues to do so. From 1974 to 1996 the bottom 20% of the population lost 10% in real income, real income according to inflation. The top 20% gained 39%. The top 5% gained 65%.

Hear these words from Isaiah 58: "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless and poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...?" Jesus' identification with the least in Matthew 25, so familiar to us.

Our American history as a church that had a thirst for justice as well as a thirst for souls; and I've seen that same thirst for justice and souls as I have been in other parts of the globe as a part of our United Methodist Church. Committed, yes, to the improvement of the quality of life of all God's people. The late Dr. Benjamin Mays, great educator and mentor, so many including Martin Luther King Jr., once said that "The test of a true religion is not how we treat one who holds a high position in society but how we treat the one who has no position to hold. Not how we respond to the call of one who wields power, but how we respond to the call of one who has no power to command us. Religion is not how we teach the rich but rather the attitude we take toward the poor." Acting otherwise may be the political thing to do. It may be the tactful or diplomatic thing to do. It may be that which is beneficial to our self-interest, but that's not the real test. It's not the real test.

Paragraph 104 in our *Book of Discipline* declares that the heart of Christian ministry is Christ's ministry of outreaching love. To identify with and seriously act on behalf of the poor and the powerless is to risk, to risk the loss of some of one's own power; one's own privilege; one's own entitlement' one's own convenience—individually, corporately, or institutionally.

God's gift of love is a gift for transformation. Ron Sider in his recent book, *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America*, wrote that biblical justice does not mean we should merely help victims cope with oppression; it teaches us to remove, to remove it. Biblical justice

does not merely require fair procedures for the poor; it demands new opportunity.

Howard Thurman, in his autobiography, describes his experience as a pastor—the fellowship of All People’s Church in San Francisco—what he learned about love, said that one of the central things was that the experience of being understood by another was of primary importance. Somewhere deep within was a place beyond all thoughts and virtues that had to be confirmed before I could run the risk of opening my life up to another to find ultimate security in ultimate vulnerability. This is to be love.

I think that God’s love finds the place where the individual, or the institution, or the organization, yea, the church where those souls are undressed, where ultimate vulnerability and ultimate security come together. What about Jesus going to the cross, secure in the knowledge of who he was and who God was and his relationship to God? But completely vulnerable as he went to the cross. But an explosive love was manifested there, a love that saved the world from sin and death on Friday, and delivered new life on Sunday.

And so we, in receiving this love, in sharing this love, are able to risk beyond ourselves and live through Christ. That’s transformation. That’s, that’s miracle talk. That is in the spirit of the words of that gospel song, “Love Lifted Me.” When nothing, nothing else could help, love lifted me. A heart for Christian ministry is the ministry of Christ’s outreaching love. It’s serious. It’s radical. It enables engagement with a systemic and with the established.

When I was a district superintendent, there was on my district, or the edge of the district, a church—very small, very small congregation, German origin. In fact, I remember going to that church. It has—it had always been small. I remember going to it for the 100th anniversary. And in true itinerant fashion, they had had 69 pastors in 100 years. I remember that congregation. It was served part-time by a retired pastor, but his spouse was also a pastor in another small congregation, which was the United Church of Christ. And her church became so small that it had to close, and she wrote a letter to her congregation as they were about to close. And this is a bit from that. “I am writing my last letter to you sitting in my backyard. I look at the orderly array of gray patio blocks, and see the most amazing sight. In the cracks all kinds of flowers and plants have sassily jumped up, making a lovely unplanned garden. Here are violets, Mayflowers, columbine, myrtle, Dutchmen’s breeches, and many others which I can not name.

This is my scattered congregation out in the world: outrageous upstarts who will disturb the established order, God’s people scattered and gathered, reaching out with Christ’s love in the various configurations for us of this global connection. Loving because we live in the world through Christ without exclusion, the world and everybody in it.”

You know, there’s that incident in the life of Jesus of the rich young man who comes to Jesus with the question about

inheriting eternal life. And in the course of the conversation the young man tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments. And the Scripture says that Jesus looks on him and really loved this young man. Then he said to him, “You lack one thing. Go and sell what you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And then come and follow me.” And when he heard this he was shocked. He was shocked and went away grieving because he had many possessions.

I kind of think, you know, that this young man—when he came to Jesus—he was asking a question that he had already answered. He had done it all. He really was coming for a blessing; he was n’t asking for—asking for a response from Jesus.

I wish, though, I could rewrite that, the end of that. And if I could rewrite that ending, I would have this young man walking away from Jesus and then reflecting and praying a bit and then running back to catch up with Jesus and say, “Jesus, wait a minute! I know that I failed the test, but just let me walk with you. Just let me talk with you. Just let me listen to you awhile. Just let me watch you. Just let me follow your example. I promise not to ask any questions unless they’re authentic. Strengthen and empower me spiritually in your love, that I may share your love with others your peace, your compassion, your justice. That I may tell your stories. Let me be with you. Even in my failings, let me be with you.” I wish I could have rewritten that story, because that’s the way we are. Walking with Jesus, walking with Jesus, developing our spiritual power. Making our mistakes, yes! Staying close.

There’s a story in the life of my family that I’ve only told once, and that was at my annual conference. My paternal grandparents were born into slavery. And when I told this story at annual conference one of the young people said, “Bishop, I did n’t know you were that old.”

Well, see this story, what happened was this, that I am a younger son, very younger son, at least in relationship to my father and my father was the baby in his family. He had nieces and nephews that were older than he was. It was one of those kind of situations where you have these big families and those born at the end, in his case, found themselves being much, much—almost in another generation.

But my grandmother and my grandfather came from Alabama and moved to Mississippi as slaves and this story is the story of the day of emancipation for them. My grandmother was out in the field, the cotton field, working. My grandfather came running and said to my grandmother, “I’ve got some important news for you.” She kept right on working and he said, “STOP!” She still kept right on working because it was n’t time to stop, and no overseer had given any kind of instructions. And then he said to her, he said, “Virginia, we’re free.” She kept right on walking, or, kept right on working rather, because it did n’t register. He said, “Virginia, we’re free!” And, when the impact began to sink in she just sat right down on the ground, began to sob. And my grandfather kept on talking to her, telling her about the instructions,

giving her instructions saying, "Well, we have to, we have to go back to our own place and then there's going to be a meeting at the main house and they're going to tell us what to do after that. Then he reached down to help my grandmother off the ground, up off the ground, and she resisted. And she said, "Come on down here with me. Let us get on our knees and thank God for this gift of freedom. And let us pray for the strength and the guidance that we will use it well!"

Let us give thanks for this gift of God's love. Pray for the strength and guidance--continue to pray--that we will use it well. God's gift of love for the world and everybody in it. Let us continue to pray for strength and guidance that we will use it well. God's love was revealed among us in this way. God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Glory hal le lu jah! Amen!