

A little later Jesus went to a city called Nain. His disciples and a great crowd traveled with Him. As Jesus approached the city gate, a dead man was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was with her. When Jesus saw her, He had compassion for her and said, "Don't cry." The Lord stepped forward and touched the stretcher on which the dead man was being carried. Those carrying him stood still. Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, get up." The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Awestruck, everyone praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help God's people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding region.

The stories in this season of the church year are about Jesus and healing. After He was baptized Jesus stood in the temple, unrolled the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me. God has sent Me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And then He spent the next three years living out prophecy, that promise, by preaching, releasing, teaching, and healing.

There was a separation between God and God's people... a separation that was filled with tradition and politics and human misunderstanding. There was a gap in realizing the difference between the letter of the Law and the intent of the Law. Jesus came to stand in the gap. Jesus came to show us God's intention for how we should live as God's people.

If you've traveled in the UK you've probably seen the signs in the underground that say, "Mind the Gap." There's a gap between the station platform and the train doors

that if unnoticed is a dangerous liability, and so signs and verbal warnings are given, “Mind the Gap.”

Last month leaders from the global United Methodist Church (Bishops and delegates from all around the world) met in Portland, Oregon, at the General Conference that convenes every four years. One of the issues discussed was human sexuality and the United Methodist Church’s position on including gays, lesbians, and transgender people into the full life of the church... ordaining and marrying them and recognizing them as fully gifted and called to the name Christian as anyone... as everyone. The discussion was tabled while the Bishops form a committee to continue to discuss this.

This isn’t a “Witness” about General Conference or about sexual equality... it’s about how we live in, and how we mind, “the gap.” The gap we live in is called by theologians “the already and the not yet.” The Kingdom of God has begun... Jesus ushered in the new kingdom and the new understanding of what it is to love God with all we are and to love others as God loves us. And yet we don’t have to look far to see despair, brokenness, poverty, hatred, violence, and injustice, distorting, polluting and attempting to destroy this world that God so loves. The Kingdom of God has begun but it is far from finished. We live in this cavernous gap between the “already and the not yet” and we pray “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, [here] on earth as it is in heaven.” And we don’t lose hope because we believe that Jesus came to stand in the gap... and that by following Him... living as He did... we too are standing in the gap. We are helping to build the Kingdom of God.

There are those who are looking critically at the United Methodist Church following our General Conference. Some of our critics are outside our denomination and some are inside. People who are excluded from full inclusion in the rights we take for granted (marriage and ordination) are grieving and fearful... and there is still talk of a split in the global United Methodist Church. Last week I asked you what you love about the church. It's important even as we judge or look critically at the church that we also look at the gifts and blessings of the church... because in fact, we are the church. There's no scriptural reference to the church as a place or a building. The church is the body of Christ... that's you, that's me... that's everyone trying to faithfully follow Jesus Christ.

Here's something I love about being United Methodist. We are people who from our very roots "mind the gap." We are people who practice our faith, who grow strong, spiritual muscles by worshipping together, by prayer, by reading scripture, and by coming together around the Lord's Table to eat the Bread of Life and drink from the Cup of Salvation. John Wesley, the Anglican priest who founded Methodism, was strict in his teaching and preaching that practicing our faith is how we fulfill the Great Command to "love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy." We understand, because of our Methodist heritage, that to merely to refer to ourselves as Christian, without practicing Christianity, is akin to sitting in a garage and calling ourselves a Mini-Cooper.

Practicing Christianity makes us strong enough to engage... to help heal the world. Our arms are strong enough to help our neighbor. Wesley was strict in his own spiritual practices, and insisted that what identifies Christians is also the second part of

the Great Command to “Love others as well as you love yourself.” We love our neighbor by feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and the prisoner, advocating for justice, and making sure that the needs of the most vulnerable of God’s children, including children, the elderly, the immigrant, and the homeless, are cared for. In this way, we are like Jesus; we are minding the gap. We believe that our love and care for - and our ministry with - the people Jesus called “the least and the lost” helps bridge the gap between heaven and earth... between what God wills for all people... between the “already and the not yet.” We Methodists are a people of hope because rather than despairing over the state of the world we are praying, worshiping, singing, eating, and rolling up our sleeves to make sure the needs of God’s people (that would include every blessed one of us) are tended to. Thank God I’m a Methodist! (If you weren’t here last week you missed me singing that song... but in truth, you didn’t miss much.)

In today’s scripture we see three ways Jesus that witnesses to us about the nature and will of God. When we understand the will of God we’re better able to follow it. Jesus suffered with those who suffer. Jesus saw the needs of a whole family. And Jesus disregarded rules. Jesus saw a funeral procession for a widow whose only son had died. Luke tells us that Jesus had compassion on the woman. The word “compassion” means not to feel sorry but “to suffer with”. Jesus suffered with the widow who had lost her only son. This tells us that God suffers with us. When we suffer, God is not far away, looking down on us with pity... God is with us, sharing our suffering. God is in solidarity with us. From these six verses in Luke’s gospel we see that we are not alone. God is with us, and this knowledge allows us to stand in the gap of the world - this unfinished and unfulfilled Kingdom of God - with faith and courage. It allows us to

declare, when others around us are preaching “doom and gloom” that God is present, and that God is not finished with us yet. Because we are not alone we live with hope and we continue to work for the coming of God’s Kingdom here on earth... as it is in heaven. And because God has compassion on us, we are able to have compassion for others. In that time, in Roman culture, to be moved was a sign of weakness... and even today we want people to “cowboy up” or “take it like a man” but because Jesus has compassion for and solidarity with us, we are moved by human suffering... we are able to suffer with those who suffer.

Jesus restored the man and healed a family. He saw their needs and tended to them. A woman in that day was dependent on the men in her family to take care of her. She’d have had no resources of her own and without a husband or son, a brother or uncle or another man in her family would have been responsible for her. Without a man... the widow in this story (and women in that day) were in danger of starvation or needing to sell their bodies. It wasn’t just the dead man that Jesus saw and healed. It wasn’t just his mother. It was the family; it was the system. From this scripture we see that salvation is for families and communities... not just for individuals. This was the understanding of the prophets... God’s promises were for the nation of Israel and not just for the select. We Methodists have strong roots in seeing and caring for the needs of all people... in bridging gaps wherever there is human need. We believe in personal salvation, and we also believe in, and pray and work for, the salvation of the world. We believe that God loves and longs for all of us...

Jesus disregarded the Law by touching a dead person. He would be made unclean, which meant that for a period of time He’d be excluded from the community,

from worship... it was a separation from holiness, from God. But Jesus put the needs of a man, and a woman, ahead of the Law. Instead Jesus demonstrated that holiness was both an internal and external matter. He said to the Pharisees, those keepers and enforcers of the Mosaic Law: "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the One who made the outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you."

Throughout the gospels we see that Jesus put the needs of people before institutional needs. Jesus touched, healed, and blessed... all without finding out first a person's beliefs or theological understanding. Jesus showed us, and modeled for us, that all life is sacred... all human beings are of sacred worth. And this is a challenge set before us as the church... that we not put the needs of our institution before the needs of people.

Christians are called to be mindful of the gap... the gap between hope and despair, the gap between who is invited and who is excluded, the gap between God's Kingdom which has already begun and is also not fully here yet. And while we are minding the gap by our spiritual practices of loving God and loving others... God is minding us. God is tending us, loving us, feeding us. This morning we come to the Table because we believe that we will meet the Risen Christ here in this sacred meal that is His body, broken for us, and His blood, the sign of the new covenant with God. Everyone is welcome. Everyone belongs.

I invite you, as you're able, to stand and sing, "Come Share the Lord."