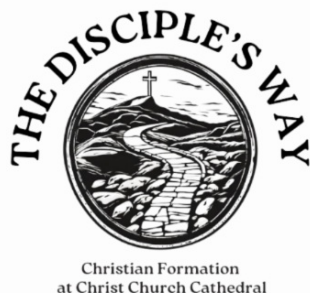




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Week of May 13, 2024:

“Finding Common Ground – Loving Our Neighbors Across Religious Divides”

– Acts 17:22-28 (CEB)

MONDAY, May 13, 2024 - Matthew 2:1-12

A star to reach Zoroastrian priests

Who were these wise men (Greek *magoi*) who came from the East seeking the newborn “King of the Jews”? They weren’t “kings” (the Christmas carol notwithstanding), and the text never said how many there were. “From the east” probably meant they were Persian, most likely Zoroastrian students of the stars. They followed an unexpected star toward the alluring hope that a new King offered the world a fresh start.

- These weren’t the first Persians in the Bible. Over 500 years earlier, Persia defeated Babylon and let exiled Hebrews go back to Jerusalem. The Persian king Cyrus received high prophetic praise (cf. Isaiah 44:24 - 45:6). The prophet called him God’s “shepherd” and God’s “anointed” (Hebrew *mashiach*), even though God said, “you don’t know me.” Are you at all surprised that God would move a prophet to so praise a foreign king with limited (if any) grasp of “correct theology”?
- The followers of a foreign religion may have tracked the star for as much as 18-24 months. (After their visit, Herod brutally ordered the death of every boy 2 years old and younger.) Yet when these wealthy foreigners “saw the child with Mary his mother [a poor peasant girl],” they fell to their knees and “honored him.” What does that tell you about the God who invited Zoroastrians through the stars and valued their worship of the newborn king?

Prayer: Lord of the whole world, you didn’t want only people with the “correct” theology to share heaven’s joy at Jesus’ birth. Thank you for caring enough to reach far beyond human boundaries to share that joy. Amen.

TUESDAY, May 14, 2024 - Genesis 12:1-3, Jeremiah 29:1-7

Blessing "all the families of the earth"

God made great promises to Abraham, including "a land I will show you" and "I will bless you." Such promises tempt human nature to think, "God likes me more than anyone else!" But God blessed Abraham so that he and his descendants would share the blessing: "All the families of earth will be blessed because of you." And after Babylon's brutal capture of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah urged the Israelite exiles to pray for the prosperity and peace—of Babylon! Even as defeated exiles, he urged them to love their neighbors.

- Just before Abraham's story, Genesis 11:1-9 told the story of the Tower of Babel. Scholar Theodore Hiebert wrote, "The text itself emphasizes the human wish to preserve one common culture (11:1-4). This wish comes into conflict with God's aim to create a new world with different cultures (11:5-9)." * Too often people see difference as a threat, something to hate and resist. What (if anything) has helped you learn to value the diverse human family God created?
- Jeremiah was calling Israel's exiles to be both smart and generous. "People aren't being urged to seek the welfare of their own city but to commit themselves to a city where they don't belong and that they think they'll soon leave. They're to seek the welfare of the city where they're forced to live because their own welfare is tied up with that city." ** How does the prophet's message point to why it's important for you and your church family to better love your neighbors?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you wanted Abraham to care about blessing "all the families of earth." Plant that kind of heart in me, too, as one of Abraham's spiritual descendants. Amen.

* Theodore Hiebert, study note on Genesis 11:1-9 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 200T. Explored in depth in his book *The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2019.

** John Goldingay, *Jeremiah for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 145.

WEDNESDAY, May 15, 2024 - Jonah 4:1-11

Teaching Israel that God pitied Nineveh, "that great city"

What did Jonah think was "utterly wrong"? He hoped to see Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, leveled! But Jonah 3:10 said, "God stopped planning to destroy [the people of Nineveh], and he didn't do it." The Hebrew Scriptures included this story, not to endorse Jonah's attitude, but through God's challenge to the angry prophet to show that God's caring and love truly extends to the whole world.

- The writer of Jonah had a superb ironic touch. The book described what would have been an astounding preaching success—a whole city repenting and turning to God. The preacher's reaction? "Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry" (Jonah 4:1)! What made Jonah so angry? Is it possible for God to care about (120,000) people without approving violent or destructive actions like Assyria's cruelty toward Israel (and all other nations)?
- The story of Jonah ended with a question, not a statement. God asked Jonah, "Can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" Is there any person or group of people you'd rather see God "zap" than to see them repent? Is it right for God to

extend heaven's offer of mercy to all people?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes, like Jonah, I wish you'd hate people I hate. But you call me to change my attitude, not yours. Guide and lead me as I wrestle with that change of spirit. Amen.

THURSDAY, May 16, 2024 - John 4:27-40, Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus' expansive mission

Jesus' disciples seemed to think no sharing could do any good in the hostile territory of Samaria. Jesus modeled an important spiritual vision for them. "Open your eyes," he said, "and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest" (verse 35). Jesus' actions in Samaria were an early preview of the "Great Commission" he gave his followers. It included (and includes) caring about "all nations," making continual choices to invest our energy and talents in making the lives of others better.

- John 4:27 said Jesus' disciples were "shocked" to see him talking to the woman at the well. * They might have understood him shaming her about her racial or moral inferiority. But he offered her "living water" (verse 10) and told her he was the Messiah everyone hoped for (verse 26). In short, he treated her like any other human being he cared about and came to save. How can Jesus' example upgrade the way you treat and relate to any "Samaritan women" you encounter?
- Jesus claimed "all authority in heaven and on earth." He said he would use that authority in this way: "I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." In his day, that meant not even the Roman Empire could block him from being with his followers. And no power on earth today has the authority to make Jesus abandon you. How can knowing Jesus is with you give you courage, strength and peace? How can it make us fearless as a congregation?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me anew this week to recognize and value your image in myself, and in all the people, male and female, happy and hurting, who cross my path. Amen.

* [Click here](#) to see a 5-minute clip from the superb 2003 film *The Gospel of John* (using the text of John from *The Good News Bible*) which brings the story in John 4 alive.

FRIDAY, May 17, 2024 - Acts 17:16-34

Paul's passion to reach Gentile philosophers

On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul spent time in Athens, the "other religions" capital of his world. Athens was, in its day, what we might call a university town, with lots of novelty-loving philosophers. Given a chance to speak to a gathering on Mars Hill, Paul declared his own faith winningly while giving a model for dealing respectfully and lovingly with people of different faith traditions.

- Luke, maybe with a wry smile, wrote that the Athenians and their foreign guests "used to spend their time doing nothing but talking about or listening to the newest thing." Paul's message about Jesus, especially his resurrection, seemed very novel in Athens. Could it be that in increasingly un-Christian parts of our culture and world, the "novelty" of the good news

might get more of a hearing from some people than its antiquity?

- Some people would expect the apostle Paul (and Christians after him) to denounce the Athenians as pagan libertines and idolaters, going straight to hell. But Paul's actual sermon had a respectful, inclusive tone. (In verse 28, he quoted a Cretan philosopher named Epimenides and the Stoic poet Aratus.) Was quoting pagan writers "selling out" his faith? How can openness to faiths and cultures other than your own allow you to create conversation rather than condemnation?

Prayer: King Jesus, when Paul preached in Athens, he quoted Greek poets and Cretan philosophers. Help me to know the culture around me well enough that I can use it to communicate without letting that culture subvert my faith. Amen.

SATURDAY, May 18, 2024 - Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Showing love to one another in Christ's family

Nowhere in Scripture will you find instructions that say, "Treat your neighbors with kindness, unless their beliefs differ from yours." Implicit in Paul's instructions was the understanding that we are to treat all people with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We are, in fact, to love all people.

Admittedly, this becomes more complicated when people's fundamental beliefs are not the same as yours. Rather than looking at this as a problem and trying to "fix" them, Paul said (cf. especially Romans 14:1- 15:7), see it as a way to love extravagantly, working to find unity in unexpected places.

- Paul wrote in Romans 14:19, "So let's strive for the things that bring peace and the things that build each other up." Why is this harder when people's beliefs are different than yours? What is one concrete thing you can do this week that builds up another person, especially a person with whom you differ? What principles can guide you in deciding when loving your neighbor is more valuable than winning an argument?
- John Wesley, Methodism's founder, said in a sermon titled "A Catholic Spirit," "Even though a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without doubt, we may." * How did Paul's teachings in today's passages shape Wesley's theology? Is there someone in your life with whom you do not think alike, yet you need to love alike?

Prayer: Compassionate God, help me to major in majors and minor in minors—and leave the judging to you. Help me to "put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." Amen.

* To read Wesley's entire sermon, "A Catholic Spirit" edited into modern English, [click here](#).



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