

# “A Kindness in God’s Justice”

Acts 2:14, 36-41; I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-25

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 23, 2023, The Third Sunday of Easter, April 23, 2023, dedicated to Elsie Lela Hillyard on her baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation. Amen.*

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How many times in your life have you told a family story only to have one of your siblings, (or parents, spouses, or partners) say, “I don’t remember it that way at all?” (That is a nice version of their response?). Or when gathered with friends remembering events in your lives, have you found yourself thinking or saying, “were we even at the same place at the same time?” Memory shapes our perspectives without our willing it to be so.

Today’s readings are all about perspective.

The Gospel tells the story of two disciples whose perspective threw them into blind grief. As the Risen Christ, the stranger, walked with them, they described him as a “failed messiah” – assuming that everyone assessed the situation as they did. Jesus took it all in – listened to it all, allowing them to vent their desolation as they walked along.

Then, in the way only a close friend can do, he shook them out of their stupor with an all-too-familiar, loving reproach: “You knuckleheads How! long did you walk with Jesus without learning anything? Have you forgotten all he said about dying and rising – that all of Scripture teaches God’s love cannot be overcome by death?...

“...Let’s take it once more from the top.”

Sitting there at the table he goes over it all over again. He does this with one gesture. He takes the bread, he blesses it, he breaks it and gives it to them once again. Then– they remember! They remember! They remember! Just as he did at the table at the Last Supper. He tells them, “Remember me and they remember.”

He tells them that giving themselves totally for others is God’s route to the fullness of life.

In Acts, Peter teaches them something similar in his Pentecost reprise of the mystery of Jesus. Peter recounts the historical events as everyone knew them. He then proclaims that all that happened to and through Jesus was part of the process of accomplishing the divine plan for the world. Having reminded them of Jesus’ goodness, his rejection, death and resurrection, Peter summarized it all saying, “It was impossible for him to be held by death.”

I love this! “It was impossible for him to be held by death!”

Luke the evangelist, as author of both his gospel and Acts, gave us these two different renditions of the same story. For the early church, it was a story they heard from participants (who probably each had their own version). Ultimately, the story is that, in Christ, the Holy Spirit is filling Earth and her inhabitants. But, as we and the Emmaus travelers know only too well, it takes a long time for Jesus’ followers to understand that.

And so, for us? How do we see in a new way? How do we act having seen through the lens of a new perspective?

On this weekend of Earth Day and for all of us at First Church and among the 31 congregations of BREAD, two days before the 2023 Nehemiah Action – the first completely live, in-person Action in 4 years – we need to listen long and carefully to one line from the first letter of Peter. He says, “**Conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your sojourn.**” Again... “*Conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your sojourn.*” I read these words and I see the kindness in God’s justice.

The author wrote that nearly 2,000 years ago. We hear a modern rendition of it today as Pope Francis tells us in “**Laudato Si’, on Care for Our Common Home**” to show reverence for every bit of creation because “*it is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust on our planet.*”

Wow! We are connected to one as if the last speck of dust on our planet. That is how connected we are.

Peter told his audience that the people of his time failed to recognize that Jesus was sent by God – despite the good he did. The travelers to Emmaus did not recognize the Risen Christ even as he was walking and talking with them – not until he prayed with them – and broke bread with them and shared communion with them.

Do you see how we miss things? We all do it. Every single one of us. We miss things that are right in front of us – until we have a new perspective.

Until the 19th century, most Christians accepted slavery as a natural state of being for African Americans – until they knew they had to change the laws. And then it became clear through the battles of abolitionists, and folks in the underground railroad and a war that you had to see scripture differently. You had to have a completely new perspective to interpret scripture correctly and shift from the madness of slavery to freedom. We find ourselves in a similar position today – in relation to our care for the earth, and the unmitigated craziness of gun violence and our gun regulations – so many other things (“Called to a New Perspective,” NCR, Mary McGlone, Apr. 22, 2023).

We need a new perspective. **When we as humans accept new perspectives, we must put them into action.** Today, in *Laudato Si'*, Francis makes an extraordinary claim as he invites us to recognize all of creation as “*a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.*” He adds that, for Christians, “*the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ.*” When I read Francis’ words, I see not only nature and creation but each human being in our family of humanity.

Just as people of Jesus’ day missed the point, many of us today remain unaware or insufficiently concerned about how we are shaping the future of our planet. While the crisis of Earth is but one of the ways in which God’s plan is being thwarted, apart from nuclear warfare – which is the absolute worst conceivable way – we see no other evil compares to the possibility that all life on Earth could be snuffed out because of human carelessness or apathy.

Similarly, when I look at Gun Violence, I see the relentless toll it is taking on our nation. Every day more than 300 people are killed or injured by guns in the United States – every single day. Most of these stories never make the news. Now, each day, it seems, we read one story after another about the use of guns wielded as mini-weapons of mass destruction killing children, teens, and adults – in schools, at teen dance parties, on the doorstep of a neighbor’s house and in the driveway of a neighbor house and on and on and on... we need a new perspective, and we need to act – to come up with new solutions.

What I love about BREAD is that we research the Problems and Solutions with every single issue we address. We have done that for 27 years – a long track record of developing new perspectives – don’t you think? Last week, I shared the solutions for affordable housing and our environmental crisis here in Franklin County. This week – we have solutions to issues of violent and violent crime.

The solutions are fourfold.

First, **Reconciliation** – presents solutions for communication between the police and the community that allows each to gain a new perspective with greater understanding and deepening trust – and then alter patterns of behavior. Both a police perspective and a community perspective in the same room.

Second, **Active Bystander Training for Police** – A.B.L.E., Active Bystander Training for Law Enforcement, is an evidence-based training program for law enforcement from Georgetown U. Law School's Innovative Policing Project. Too often, we see one police officer stand by and do nothing as his or her partner or another officer causes harm or makes a serious error. If implemented with fidelity, which includes regular follow-up, ABLE may bring about a change in police culture that supports bystander intervention. ABLE alone will not create the complete culture change needed; but if paired with other major changes, may make a difference.

Third, **Reassigning Roles to Appropriate Personnel** – In Eugene, Oregon, the city contracts with a mental health agency, CAHOOTS. When a 911 call involves a person with mental illness, CAHOOTS answers the call instead of the police. The contract has saved the police tens of millions of dollars and has provided people with mental illness with treatment, instead of arrest, incarceration, or armed force. Columbus can develop models for using unarmed, trained personnel to respond to non-emergencies, including mental health and traffic stops.

One of the things that I have to appreciate collaborating with the police through the years – we ask the police to do more than anyone else in our community. We train our officers to care for public safety and then expect them to be and do everything. We expect them to go into places we expect no one else to enter. As a pastor, I have been called into homes in domestic violence situations and it is a nearly impossible challenge to negotiate. Yet, we expect this of our police every day. We expect them to be mental health workers, too. That is wrong. This program helps the police and helps everyone in our community as well.

Fourth, **Group Violence Intervention** – Group Violence Intervention (G.V.I.) is a “deterrence-focused” initiative to reduce gun violence and associated homicides quickly and dramatically. The initiative evolved from an initial project (Ceasefire) led by David Kennedy in Boston during the 1990’s. Although the details of implementation may vary, the basic structure involves a collaborative effort of law enforcement, social service agencies and community leaders.

14 gangs and 480 people in Columbus produce half the deaths in our city every year. This needs to be addressed.

Together they deliver a clear message to violent street groups that violence must stop. Every initiative begins with an initial mapping of relationships of known violent offenders. Once established all partners come together to address violent groups with a unified voice through call-ins, direct contact, community outreach and media outlets delivering a message that the violence must stop. The message is followed with the promise, (the carrot) of a broad range of social services aimed at changing the behavior of criminal activity for those who opt to participate. When violence continues, however, the response is swift and strong prosecution at the federal level (the stick).

Most people in this situation choose the carrot over the stick. It is an effective model. It works.

There are solutions here. We learn that there are new ways to enter into old problems. We need new perspectives.

I invite you all to go the website for BREAD – [www.breadcolumbus.com](http://www.breadcolumbus.com). See their analysis about this and all six of our current issues. Much more importantly, please join me, our BREAD Network and thousands of other Central Ohio Christians and Jews this Tuesday evening, April 26th at 6:45pm at the Celeste Center where our power in numbers will move us forward on new perspectives and collaborative initiatives to address Eldercare, Juvenile Justice, Environmental Justice, Affordable Housing, Gun Violence and Municipal IDs.

Jesus invited the Emmaus disciples to see through his eyes. Our encounter with Jesus today should become evident in our relationships to the world around us. Living into our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue. It is not optional. It is required for each of us to be stewards of the earth.

In our closing hymn this morning, there is a phrase in the first verse, "there's a kindness in God's justice." I want us to take the perspective that the work of justice should always and forever be pointed to kindness. It should point to new perspectives as we face problems of life and solve these problems we face. When we do this, we truly experience the kindness in God's justice.

When we gain a new perspective, we begin seeing the world through God's eyes. Imagine our city turning around the violence on our streets. Imagine our city in which the pain and suffering experienced by families is significantly diminished. Visualize a world with less violence and suffering and you have seen the kindness in God's justice. Let us reach that vision – together. Amen.