

I want to start by sharing a story I found while researching this sermon. I want to say thank you and give credit to Grace Communion International for lots of the resources I've pulled from this morning.

If you live in the US, you probably have heard of the non-profit organization Habitat for Humanity. This organization, founded by Clarence Jordan, and later joined by Millard and Linda Fuller, began as an interracial community farm called Koinonia Farm outside Americus, Georgia. Its mission was to ensure that everyone was treated equally, resources were shared, and the land and natural resources were stewarded wisely.

As part of the community farm, the Fullers came up with the idea of "partnership housing," where people who needed a home worked with other volunteers to build a home at no profit. By starting "The Fund for Humanity," using money from supporters and fundraising efforts, no interest loans were provided to the new homeowners. Their house payments, in turn, would be used to continue "The Fund for Humanity" and build more houses.

What you need to know, though, is that Koinonia Farm was started in 1942 and the partnership housing effort got off the ground in 1965, during the era of segregation and before the Civil Rights movement had made any progress. Their good works got them into trouble with those who disagreed with their views about racial equality and how a Christian should live.

For example, Clarence Jordan was accused of befriending a communist named Myles Horton. Jordan told his accusers, "I really have trouble with your logic. I don't think my talking to Myles Horton makes me a Communist any more than talking to you right now makes me a..." Well, I can't repeat the expletive he used while I'm preaching, but you get the point.

Koinonia Farm ran into conflict with the Ku Klux Klan, and the group blew up the farm's roadside peanut stand, one of its fundraising efforts. When Jordan put up another roadside peanut stand, the Klan blew that one up, too. Jordan refused to quit but changed his business plan. Instead, Koinonia Farm began selling peanuts by mail order with this advertisement: "Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia."

Though some progress has been made toward equality for all people, regardless of race, gender, economics, and lifestyle choices, inequities have been built into the fibers of the governmental systems in place, not only in the US but other countries, too. As Clarence Jordan and the Fullers found out, bucking the system and advocating for the poor and marginalized is often not well received. This should not be a surprise, though. As we look at our scripture passage for today, we'll read that Jesus warned his disciples that they would face suffering and conflict because living the way of love toward all people is difficult but worth it.

Baylor University assistant professor of religion Jonathan Tran summarizes this morning's

passage from Matthew this way:

I, Jesus, do things that will get one in trouble. Inasmuch as you, disciples, do what I do, you'll get in trouble, too. But don't worry too much about that as you'll be taken care of. If you find yourself overly worried about getting into trouble, that means you are confused in one of four ways: that the things I do are not so significant that they should cause trouble; that who I am is not so significant that what I do should matter very much; that the significance of what I do and who I am do not bear on your long-term welfare; or, all the above.

Let's look at those four points laid out in this interpretation:

I, Jesus, do things that will get one in trouble. Inasmuch as you, disciples, do what I do, you'll get in trouble, too. (v. 24-25)

Jesus makes the point that if the disciples (including us) lived as he lived, caring for people in ways that often broke cultural norms, the guardians of the existing system supporting those cultural narratives would not be happy. They might even be vindictive as we can see from the way the Jewish leaders influenced Pilate to sentence Jesus to death. Jesus invites his followers to participate in the suffering that comes from loving others in a radical way.

But don't worry too much about that as you'll be taken care of. (v. 26-31)

Jesus encourages the disciples and us not to be afraid when we face conflict from caring for people in ways that conflict with societal norms. Jesus reminds us that any evil secrets will be brought into the light (v. 26), and we should speak on behalf of those who are marginalized and oppressed, listening for God to whisper in our ears what we should say (v. 27).

Undervaluing Jesus' role and being confused about who Jesus is

Because of Christianity's affiliation with empires, beginning with Constantine in 312 CE (Common Era) and his later Christianization of the Roman Empire, many Christians have been reluctant to point out the inconsistencies between governmental policies and the way Jesus lived. But Jesus is clear that cultural and governmental systems of oppression are not aligned with the kingdom of God. His hyperbole about family conflict makes clear that Jesus did not come to just make us individually feel good - but he came to prepare his disciples for the conflict that comes to us when we choose to love others in radical ways, especially those different from us and our families.

I think its important also to say that we are not Jesus. None of us can save the world alone. We believe that Jesus has already done that. There are times when the weight of the world is too much, and in order to love Jesus more fully we have to step back and rest in the loving arms of our great pastor.

But to only seek solace and comfort from Jesus is to misunderstand what it means to love him. Let's consider again the example of Clarence Jordan and Millard and Linda Fuller. Think of the

courage and conviction it took to build an interracial community farm in 1942. Think of the perseverance it required to rebuild a roadside peanut stand and then come up with another fundraising plan when that rebuilt stand was dynamited. Jordan and the Fullers were following Jesus' call to love and care for all people, and it wasn't an easy road.

If we are radically loving others, targeting the marginalized, oppressed, and poor, we will also encounter pushback and conflict. That doesn't mean we are doing anything wrong. Losing our lives is another way to talk about kenosis or the self-emptying love that Jesus exhibited by dying on the cross. In fact, Jesus promises we will actually "find" our lives when we follow his way of radical, kenotic love for all (v. 39).

So I invite you to consider the ways in which you can love in unexpected ways. Where do you need rest and nourishment from God, and where are you being called to be uncomfortable, to a love that gives of self? Where does the Prince of Peace bring you comfort and solace? But how also does that comfort and solace call you into making comfort and solace available to every human being?

The love of God surpasses all of our understanding. May the joy of the love of God give us the strength and courage to follow, even and especially when the challenge of following seems daunting.

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The Most Rev. Katherine Jefferts Schori: "A Holy Vision of Shalom":
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