

Serene Jones  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
July 10, 2017  
Sermon to General Assembly  
Assembly Theme: One

*"We Will Guard Each One's Dignity and Save Each One's Pride"*

*(Sermon Title Provided by Assembly Organizers for hymn by Peter Scholtes)*

**Scripture: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." John 17: 20-21a**

### I. Words of Gratitude

Good evening everyone. It is wonderful to be gathered again here in the assembly hall to worship together and share communion.

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, almighty God, our rock and our redeemer.*

I am very grateful to be here, tonight, and am especially thankful for everyone who is here, present in heart and mind, and for all who are working to make this gathering possible.

A special shout out to Rev. Morales and Rev. Law who preach far better than I could ever even dream of doing. It's such an honor to be up here after and before them!

Wow! Last night we elected our new General Minister, Rev. Teresa Hord Owens, a woman of profound and invigorating spirit whose witness and work is already leading us into the future with vision.

I also want to say a special word of thanks to Rev. Sharon Watkins for the invitation to preach tonight and for her incredible, historic six years of service as General Minister. Her steady hand, deep faith and prophetic spirit have empowered us to be here today. I am thankful for her many years of friendship and theological companionship.

*Beginning next week, I can imagine her and Rick, like President Obama and Michelle, water skiing in Hawaii or drifting through the streets of Rome, having mindless fun.*

Can you imagine having a sister as amazing as Rev. Verity Jones, or “V” as we call her. I love her so much, and am proud to no end of the tireless and yet always brilliant and nurturing lifeblood she has given to the vocation of ministry, to supporting pastoral leadership and to theological education in the Disciples of Christ.

I have another sister, too, Kindy, who’s in Oklahoma watching, along with my father, Rev. Dr. Joe Jones, who many of you know from his years of scholarship and teaching in theological education and his Disciples systematic theology, a Grammar of Faith. He was going to introduce me but instead is watching me, because his health prevents him from being here.

Hi Kindy. Hi Dad.

## II. Disciples Theology in a Nutshell

As you might guess from my thank you-s, I grew up in a staunchly – if you can use the word “staunchly” to describe us - Disciples’ household. This community raised me and resides in me like the calcium in my bones, the skin that wraps me together.

This means I was raised to believe, as bedrock truth, a Gospel story about reality that is distinct and precious.

I want to begin today by telling that story.

I *deeply* know that our God, the creator of all that is, is a God of love, a God who freely chooses to pour that love out upon the whole world, equally given in full measure to all God’s children and to our earth.

I believe, in my being, that through the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, we are all saved, universally. Already.

That love forms the basis of who we are, in reality. We are all profoundly and intimately interconnected, you with me, and with our precious earth. In this sense, we are one, one breathing, living, dying, messy, pulsing, changing, complex, and many faced being, whether or not we acknowledge it. That’s what we look like to God, who is the truth. We are distinct and yet mushed up together, mixed in with the earth. The blood that flows through us and the air in our lungs, all of it, binds us as one being.

I also believe, as a good disciples child, that in our Christian communities, hearing the word and sharing communion help us “wake up” to this

interconnected, Divine Love. The world clouds our eyes – call this sin - and we need them to be wiped clean so we can see the love that binds us.

And what happens when our eyes are cleared and we are awakened. Woke.

And cannot help but devote ourselves fully to living in a way that reflects this loving, interconnected reality. You don't have a choice.

There you have it.

My rather old-fashioned Disciples “theology-story” in a nutshell.

God created,

Jesus-grounded,

Grace-bounded,

Church founded,

Universal in the reach of its love and mercy

And that we are interwoven in the depths of our being and earth,

And inspired with the breathe of God's life, a spirit that seeks life,

Despite the harsh truth that we turn away from it and in sin, seek our own destruction

### III. The Place of Social Justice in the Life of Faith

#### A. *Faith and Social Justice are the Same Thing*

So, the topic I was given to focus on in my sermon today is social justice.

I think it must be part of my discipleness, but I am always perplexed by churches and people who make a distinction between faith and social justice, as if “faith” were simply our belief system and “social justice” was just one of many things that this faith leads you to seek. We all know preachers who at least once a month, give their “social justice” sermon, and the other three weeks do something else.

I'm sad to say that this past year, I have even heard Christians say that church should be a place where we don't talk about “social justice” at all, because that gets us into politics that divide people. Instead, I've heard said, church should be a “safe space” where no one brings up racism or mass incarceration and mass deportation, or the greedy, hateful political environment we live in.

This view of preaching and church, to be frank, astounds me.

When I turn to the Gospels, I don't see Jesus avoiding talking about how we should treat each other and live together. Rather, I see Jesus always, always, advocating for the most vulnerable. So, I wonder, what bible are they reading?

**You cannot open this sacred book and fail to see its intense focus on caring for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the stranger, and the poor.**

**In the Gospels, simply put, social justice is nothing more than love with legs.**

**(Pause)**

**This is not to say that the task of engaging in Gospel-grounded love talk – or “social justice” – is an easy one, particularly in our present political climate.**

### ***B. The Country’s Current Climate***

**In fact, in my lifetime, it’s never been harder, but having these theological-political conversations in church has never been more important. We are in the midst of a political, spiritual “love-crisis.”**

**We have a President who happily and without guile disparages every group of people Jesus loved. He denigrates women, singles out Muslims for discriminatory legislation, promises to deport millions of families and build walls to keep people out, and in all of this, he celebrates wealth and greed while assuming poverty is a problem the poor have created for themselves. He lives in an entirely different story than the Gospel story. In the story he tells himself about reality, hatred rules and thirst for power defines what it means to be “good”?**

**I don’t want to just focus on President Trump, either. What troubles me more than him is the millions – millions – of people who voted for him and continue applaud him. .**

**The vast majority of these supporters are church-going, bible-reading, white, educated Christian men and women, who claim to hold our same Gospel story at the center of their lives.**

**They are my relatives, my high school friends, our co-workers, our own families . . . ourselves.**

**(Pause.)**

**Who are we? The white Christian people of this United States of America? Who the hell are we? Where is the “love” that is faith? The weight of this question cannot be overstated. The future of our land and of Christianity itself depends on how we answer this.**

### **III. The Obstacles to Love-Justice: This Wound Called America**

For many folks gathered here, the hatreds of our day are not new. They are far-too-well known. They have lived this violence since the beginning of our country. Native Americans, African Americans, the Latinx community, Muslims, LGBTQ brothers and sisters, immigrants of all shapes and sizes, and women who struggle with all they have to carve out space for true equality.

These and many others know the harsher, longer-standing truth.

This past presidential election ripped off all the bandages that white, patriarchal culture has used to cover up the wound that is America.

What we are seeing now is the depth of that wound, its ragged edges and the festering infection that, though its been covered up, continues to make the whole body sick.

Yes, hear echoes of Paul in these words. In the words of our tradition, lets call this wound and the instruments of its infliction, sin.

Today I want to talk about just three parts of this wound, although there are many, many more.

**1. First: White supremacy gouged out the form of our nation and its continues to burrow, deeper and deeper, into our soul and our policies.**

Whiteness is an important term here. I'm not talking simply about the color of one's skin but rather a whole way of being for European Americans that was created way back when our nation took shape.

James Baldwin says it best: The Swedes and Norwegians did not arrive on this soil white. They became white by burning Native American villages, raping women, and ravaging the land they took. And by enslaving, as subhuman creatures, Africans whose blood and sweat they extracted to build wealth for themselves. This is how whiteness came to be.

(Pause)

What James Baldwin is trying to get us to see is that the whiteness that elected Donald Trump is an American creation with a long history. White people had to learn, through excoriating force, how to hate brown people, to torture them, to blot out of their mind's the other's humanity.

Slavery was the most brutal system of torture and violent control any society has ever known. In its church-supported, state-sanctioned form,

it lasted almost three hundred years and was followed by another one hundred and fifty years of Jim Crow laws that continued its hate.

It set up social structures that swept every group that wasn't white and male into the cauldron of its fury.

In this system, the possibility of oneness, of John's unity, of Jesus's love, becomes utterly inconceivable.

450 years - it's had that long to insinuate a system of seeing into our bones and even - and most importantly - our unconscious minds. It lives in all of us, even if we believe it doesn't.

2. Second, caught up in this fury of domination was a second sin that sadly, the vast majority of us failed to see for too long. Along with the idea of expendable bodies came the idea that land, that the earth, that the rivers, lakes, mountains, hills, and prairies existed to be bought and sold and used up until there was nothing left to use - all in the name of making money.

We treated the Earth as if its gifts were infinite. We reaped where we did not sow, and sacrificed the bounty God called us to care for upon the altar of our greed. Just as our national wound is seen in the sin of racism, it is also manifest in clear-cut forests, gaping holes left by mountaintop removal, or in waterways defiled by oil. The Earth aches and groans, protesting its exploitation with ever-larger earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes. Now, scientists tell us, if we do not repent the Earth may never recover.

3. And this cauldron of hatred released a third monster of sin: an obsession with making money, at any cost. We see it so painfully today in the consumer culture that dominates the airwaves and Internet of America. We are bombarded with ads, promising that happiness can be found, not in who we are or how loving we are, but in the things we buy and our surface, shallow identities.

Our President was elected, in part, because he is a rich man.

Wealth is our national idol: instead of pointing to justice, our moral compass now all-too-often aligns to the Almighty dollar. In 1965, only 40% of college grads said their top goal was to be very well off financially; by the end of the millennium that number grew to 75%. This obsessive materialism leaves folks spiritually empty, and the consequences of this spiritual poverty are dire.

Every day, more and more people turn to alcohol and drugs to numb this moral emptiness of being alone. We are in the grips of an opioid epidemic that continues to grow, unabated. This is not a coincidence. When people evaluate their self-worth through the lens of their paycheck, they are left defenseless in the face of life's struggles. Drugs are an easy but deadly escape.

However, in the words of Emily Dickenson, "Narcotics cannot still the tooth that nibbles at the soul."

#### IV. The Promises: The Way Forward

So I have told a very long, nasty story about our nation, and there is not a person in this room that doesn't recognize the truth of this horror.

But we are a people of the Gospel, and for us, this is not where it ends.

We are called by God to live differently,

To seek justice,

To follow Jesus

To be one, and to live as our common, beloved humanity, this can set the model for how we live together.

The weird thing is, as Disciples, we don't have to work hard to know this. It's already inside us, in the story we tell; it resides in the marrow of our bones and rich storehouse of our souls.

So . . . if it's already there, in a sense what we need to do is take a deep breathe and relax into it.

Fall into the arms of God's love and let it move through us together.

Telling you to relax and accept the truth of love seems rather paltry given the principalities and powers of our age.

But relaxing isn't as easy or weak as it seems.

It's not easy because it takes courage to relax into love's alternative reality; it takes conviction, daily practice, and it requires us to interrogate ourselves – do we actually believe the Gospel story? Do we actually love our neighbor, in real time?

**For the skeptic among us and within us, a little voice likely nags, whispering two lies that we must cast out.**

**First, the voice tells us that we don't know what to do and that the political system is too complex to fix.**

**That is a lie:**

**We know what we need. Universal healthcare. Healthy, thriving public schools. A guaranteed income so no one falls through the cracks. We need to invest in renewable energy. We need to combat the wages of white supremacy through extensive social services. It takes passing the new ERA. Open our borders and the doors to our prisons and let people walk towards spaces of health and wholeness, not cells and police gun shots.**

**It's not ambiguous. It's not unclear. It's not all that complicated.**

**We could do this tomorrow if we had the will to. There are countries in the world where this is already in place and working. We have models and we have proof.**

**The second lie is that we are so different from one another that "people of good will" can't come together to agree on anything. It's simply not true. Yes, we have much work to do, but already, in many places, coalitions are working smoothly and powerfully. There is not nearly as much division on these issues - amongst a large portion of the population - as we like to believe.**

**A society, a community marked by social justice is beautiful and simple.**

**For me, it's summed up in the vision that Toni Morrison leaves us with in her essay in *The House that Race Built*.**

**Tell story.**

**And they will know we are Christians by our love.**

**(Youth on Race - Four Churches working together, across racial divisions, to have an honest conversation on race. Need to take a lead from our youth.)**