

Let's not get tired of doing good...Let's work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity.

This morning I want to do something a little differently. I want to say a few words to frame our broader conversation overall, perhaps repeating them each week, and then I want to move into the more traditional, albeit abbreviated, sermon moment.

Today marks the first Sunday of several consecutive Sundays when we will discern together where God's Spirit is leading us as a church.

Over the past three years, we have taken to imagining how we could engage our community of Worcester. And these four areas kept surfacing through different examples:
education,
LGBTQ+ inclusion,
refugees and asylees, and
issues around people experiencing homelessness.

We can draw on any number of verses for inspiration, those commands about being kind to one other and loving one another.

But I want to hang this one piece of Galatians over the doorway way to our locker room as we march out onto the court; I want to write this one on our bathroom mirror to read when we wake up; I want this one to be the next or first verse we try to memorize; I want this one to be our framework as we move forward as a church, following the Way of Jesus Christ:

Let's not get tired of doing good because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up. So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity.

Note again, this is not about the practices of Sunday morning worship services; this is about the practice of communal life together. This is not about an inherited cultural tradition of worship; this is a new way of living in the world. That as followers of Jesus first and foremost, the priority has shifted to how we make an impact in the lives of everyone, and not just ourselves. We don't live in a secluded community to ourselves. In essence, we love and worship God when we love and are kind to our neighbors.

Now, we all wear many hats. Obviously, I'm not speaking about Easter hats and Yankees hats, but those cultural roles we assume in our everyday lives.

Some of us are parents, and lawyers, or educators and siblings, or spouses or partners or ministers or humans to a dog, or children or Americans or Brazilians or Republicans or Democrats or Moderates or Agnostic or Catholic or Baptist or Christian...

We all wear many hats. Often at the same time. If we were speaking of real hats, it might start to look ridiculous, one stacked on top of the other, but stay with me for a moment, because if that were the case that we were literally wearing multiple hats, how would anyone know what each hat was? If you have seven different hats on top of your head, how would anyone know the other hats

you're wearing except that which you wear most proudly on top?

I want to invite each of us, myself included, to make one hat most prominent, in this space to be sure, in this community of faith to be sure, but in the other areas of our lives too, and maybe especially. I want to invite you and me, to make more prominent in our mind, this hat that we all wear, even if we don't remember, or realize or even believe it:

Beloved child of God.

That's what each and every one of us is, that's who each and every one of us is,
Beloved child of God.

And if we could learn to prioritize that vision of ourselves, then we might begin to make that a more prominent way of life, and a more promising vision of the world and one another.

So, practically it means this:

That when we gather together in this space, when we gather together as friends and a community of faith, on Sundays, or on Wednesdays or any other time, We are first and foremost beloved children of God. Each of us.

Not Democrats or Republicans or rich or poor or parents or children or siblings or even Americans—we are all those things, many of them, of course.

But I'm saying that first and foremost, we are not those things. We are at our core beloved children of God. The other things might be born out of that.

It's essential that we do this exercise because we're living in a pretty cruddy time for listening to one another; an era of atrophied curiosity and expired humility. And we as people who believe in this God of hope and kindness must model the better way, as Jesus did, of learning and listening and changing our minds, and when we discover what must be done, we move towards one another. We don't silo ourselves off behind fears and misconceptions.

The only agenda I'm preaching with today, or any day, I hope, is one that prioritizes the Good News of God in Christ as our way of life and faith. That's what you've hired me, and the other pastors, to do.

So, this morning, and every morning, We are all beloved children of God, first and foremost.

And that's where these words are coming from.

Those are the words that need to settle within your own hearts and minds.

So that the Spirit of God can lead all of us forward together.

Sermon.

So let me shift now, and let me ask you the question:

What would it look like for us to dig in deeper?

In the vastness that is “education,” what would it look like for us to dig in deeper?

We are not going to solve the problems that plague our education system at the macro-level. But like a stretch of highway that someone adopts; we are responsible for caring for our little corner of the road.

Of course it’s a balance. Because we don’t want to think too small.

What does Jesus say, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains?

That reminds me of Dashrath Manjhi. He embodied these verses from Galatians and Paul:

Let’s not get tired of doing good because in time we’ll have a harvest if we don’t give up. So then, let’s work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity.

One day, in 1960, Manjhi climbed to the other side of the mountain that stood in front of his village in India. He was cutting wood, and his wife was trekking up the side of the mountain to bring him lunch. She fell down, broke the pot, and hurt herself in the fall.

Manjhi decided that something had to be done. It was a 70 kilometer journey around the mountain to get her to a doctor.

His friend Ramcharit says that Manjhi thought about the thousands of years that mountain had been there, and how many pots

it had broken over the years. He was determined to figure out a way to benefit not only himself but the whole society.¹

So he decided to cut a road through the mountain. From 8am- 1pm Manjhi would plow the fields of his neighbors for his job. But from 4am-8am, and from 1pm until the evening, he would cut at the mountain. He would burn firewood on the rocks, then he’d sprinkle water on top of the heated surface of the rocks, which would cause them to crack and allow him to chisel away.

Manjhi took responsibility for his little piece of the road he had decided to carve through that mountain. He had faith that he could make an impact, and he’d literally move pieces of that mountain to make it happen.

We’ve heard from Pastor Natalie this morning, the situation on the ground, the many challenges our students are up against in our community.

Each of these beloved children of God, face mountains that they might not be able to climb alone. But the impact that friends, mentors, teachers, parents, siblings, guardians, communities of good will and faith can have are monumental.

¹ <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/man-single-handedly-carved-road-mountain/>

Are we determined to figure out a way to benefit not only ourselves or our loved ones but the whole society, as Manjhi tried to do? To work for the good of all, as Paul puts it?

In our society, education is the means for success. It is hard to flourish and thrive without an education. In this sermon, I'm not really interested in articulating the best policies for empowering communities and school systems to flourish. Good minds have disagreed on ways to do this for some time.

What must be clear though, as we lead and live first and foremost as beloved children of God who see everyone else as beloved children of God, we must ensure that everyone has the same opportunities, and accessibility to good education.

Not *just* education, but *good* education.

If for some reason you need a reason why, take it from one of my predecessors, and our former pastors, the Rev. Jonathan Aldrich, who said in a sermon from the 1830s, when speaking of the human soul and mind, the psyche, he said:

“Its faculties are capable of immense expansion, even during the brief period of mortal existence, and *under all the disadvantages of that existence...* Every acquisition of new knowledge expands its capacities and prepares it for still further investigations...it is continually soaring after acquaintance with objects which it has not yet attained. And the wider and deeper its

researches, the more are its powers strengthened, and the better is it qualified to make still more exalted attainments. Such is the soul of man in this incipient state of its being... the soul is endowed with intelligence, as one of the prominent ingredients of its being... O, how exalted *intellectually* will the soul of man become in that eternal world of joy, ever expanding under circumstances the most felicitous, during the ages of its immortal existence.”²

Education is an issue of justice because it is vital to who we are as human beings. At our core we are learning and growing and expanding our minds, and with them our hearts.

It's a priority for each of you you're your children. That your children succeed not just financially, but as human beings, you want them to become fuller people.

Why wouldn't we want that for every child? Especially if no child is more important to God than any other?

For this and many other reasons, education has been a priority of our church from the beginning.

Go back further than Rev. Aldrich to Rev. Going, after whom our library is named. He started the first Sunday School in Worcester county, and he received tremendous backlash from the Governor. Most likely because in that period of time, the Congregational

² Sermon cited in The Worcester Pulpit by the Rev. Jonathan Aldrich, p. 329.

church was still the official church of Massachusetts, even though the US Constitution had already been ratified. So, a Baptist church educating kids caused quite the stir.

This was a period of time when Sunday School wasn't a time to teach our youth how to become baptized, it was an issue of social justice. For many, this was their only chance to learn spelling and reading and writing.

Rev. Going helped start Worcester Academy and the seminary in Newton (the precursor to Andover Newton that eventually merged into Andover Newton). He helped start a college in Ohio.

Another minister left to become a professor in KY, others become professors at seminaries, leaders of the seminaries, and even one pastor of our church, Rev. J.D.E. Jones, resigned to become superintendent of public schools in 1859.

But this isn't just about former ministers. Some of our own members were instrumental in imagining and creating First Friends early childhood education. Others have been part of serving on its board. Others of you supported HeadStart when it was housed here. Others have been a part of the summer program with other area churches to provide activities and lunches for the kids in the Elm Park school district. Still others have been a part of helping students who are English Language Learners. Some of you serve on the team that helps award scholarship from our nearly \$1 million in endowed scholarships. And many of you are current or retired educators,

teachers, and professors, social workers, mental health professionals.

All of these are good and important examples of how we can have and continue to make an impact on students in our community.

So what would it look like to dig in deeper?

We might not solve the issues of racism in our schools, where students of color are disproportionately punished, and we might not be able to eliminate bullying or cyber-bullying. But if we see each child as a beloved child of God, whose every acquisition of new knowledge expands their capacities for further inquiry, then perhaps our own capacities and imaginations for change and growth and flourishing and inquiry can expand as well.

If part of the challenge in our day is that no one is listening to or learning from one another, what better example to model the way forward than for us to try to empower and educate students so that they will be curious and humble and confident and strong?

The education system can seem daunting to fix, but it is comprised of individual minds that are capable of changing the world if we only give them time and opportunity.

The Sunday School movement, was born in England when only the wealthy had access to education. One of the very first Sunday schools was started by Hannah Ball in Buckinghamshire England in 1769. It was only one school for poor children to teach them those essential skills to survive in a

changing world, but also the skills they needed to thrive as good humans, intellectual curiosity and honesty for starters.

From her work and that of others, it grew into a movement, one that so moved their nation that in 1870, universal elementary education became the law of the land.

Sometimes we're only making an impact on our little stretch of the road. And other times, like with Hannah Ball, making an impact on our little stretch of the road ends up stretching beyond our imaginations.

And sometimes it means literally moving mountains.

Manjhi chipped and dug and chiseled away at that mountain. From 1960 when he began, until he completed it in 1982. For twenty two years, he devoted his life to making a road for other people. Literally, and metaphorically. His faith, literally and metaphorically moved a mountain so his village could have access to healthcare and education.

Friends,
First Baptist Church of Worcester,
FBCWoo,
when it comes to education,
what would it look like for us to dig in deeper?

Figuratively, or literally...