

[PRAYER] [BLANK] I thank you for being here on a special Sunday for The United Methodist Church: Native American Ministries Sunday. From the founding of Methodism, we have reached out to the original people of this land with the love of Christ. Almost two hundred years ago, when the Cherokee nation was forced to leave their land in the Eastern United States, it was Methodists who marched in solidarity with them, on a brutal journey that became known as the “trail of tears.” Today, the original people of this land live mostly in deep poverty. I have seen this with my eyes, out West, and in this state. I cannot unsee it. Our compassion as Christians helps many in need.

Compassion. I am so very grateful for our faith as Christians, which promises new life in Jesus, new life that restores the health of our hearts, hearts that must beat with compassion, if the saving grace of Jesus is to change who we are, and how we are. A cold heart is not a Christian heart. It is the basic nature of who God has intended us to be as human beings. We were formed by God in love, even though God knew what we would be far from perfect creations. God’s compassion made us, and, through faith in Jesus Christ, God’s compassion can save us.

Having hearts filled with compassion like the heart of Jesus can save us, but many people today don’t care about compassion. There has been a survey of American high school and college students taken since the 1960s. It asks questions that reveal their attitudes about life, including their ability to feel empathy, or compassion. Between the years 2000 and 2009, the survey scores for compassion and empathy in high school and college students dropped 40 percent, when compared to previous generations.

It seems that the young adults of our nation are losing the compassion that is the core of our Christian faith, or perhaps, sometimes, confusing compassion with enabling. They are disconnected from us, from one another, and from God’s compassionate future for them, forged in love on a cross, in Jesus. Young Americans are not the only ones in God’s world losing sight of compassion. My dear friend Neway, a Christian priest in Ethiopia, has deep heartbreak, as his nation dissolves into bitter tribal wars, while more than 6 million people are starving there. Hate and apathy is killing compassion today, again, and again.

It is one thing to lose compassion when you are starving in the middle of wars, and droughts. It is another thing to lose compassion in a land of relative plenty.

[REFUGEE] As we prepare to welcome a new refugee family to our Unity House, we will have a constant reminder of how much compassion matters in our world. We will be helping people very different from us, coming from places of unthinkable violence and loss. The world will be right at our doorstep. And when we are not hosting refugee families at Unity House, we have offered temporary housing for homeless young adults there, young people whose lives have felt little, if any, compassion from a world that has forgotten the love of Jesus. [BLANK]

I hope and pray that we want to feel we can offer compassionate love to others, like Jesus does. We all need this new life of compassion, peace, and hope, that comes from Jesus. And yet, compassion is a challenging virtue. It asks us to accept being

vulnerable when we least want to be vulnerable. The world shouts at us to pass by those needing our compassion. And then, when we wonder why we don't find compassion for us, we blame the world. What's wrong with this picture? Everything.

[NEW LIFE] Last week, in my first “New Life in Jesus” sermon, I talked about how, if we want to claim new life in Jesus, we must proclaim it, in our own lives, in our homes, and in God's world. This week, we have to think about how to proclaim what the world does not expect. You see, new life in Jesus goes against all expectations, especially when we have given up on God's compassion.

[BLANK] There was a man in the time of Jesus who had forgotten what the compassion of God was like. His name was Saul. He was a Pharisee, someone who studied and enforced Jewish religious and civil law. Not all Pharisees were bad, or evil, but many of them were afraid of what Jesus was doing. They resented his teachings against their authority, and they thought that calling Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, was blasphemy - insulting the name of God. And so, when the followers of Jesus started to proclaim to the world that Jesus was risen from the dead, the risen Messiah, the risen Son of God, many Pharisees were very upset. They didn't look at the love, and the compassion, and the healing the Jesus brought into the world. They only saw how Jesus had blown right past every expectation of who and how God was to them. To them, proclaiming Jesus had to be stopped, at all costs - even the cost of people's lives.

[SAUL] And so, one day, Saul took off on a trip to the city of Damascus, where the followers of Jesus were proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues of that city. He was ready to arrest these Christians. He was going to take them back to Jerusalem, where they would be convicted, and probably stoned to death, as other early Christians had been stoned to death. Hate and fear ruled his heart. He wanted the compassionate Jesus dead and gone - and soon.

[LIGHT] And then, just as the history of the world changed when Jesus rose from the dead, history changed in a whole new way. Saul was overwhelmed by bright light coming from heaven, and from that light, came a voice, the voice of Jesus: “Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?” I can't think of something more unexpected to happen to a person who had lost all compassion, on the road to trying to kill the compassion of God's love in Jesus.

[BLANK] In spite of what Saul was doing, Jesus was compassionate with Saul. Saul was ready to send Christians to their death, and yet Jesus knew that, underneath it all, Saul was a man who loved God. Saul had lost his compassion, but even Saul could find new life, in Jesus. Jesus wasn't going to destroy Saul. No, Jesus wanted to restore Saul to a serving a loving God, in Jesus. Jesus wasn't going to destroy Saul for his sins. No, Saul's sins spoke for themselves, in the presence of Jesus, the living God, risen from the dead. And Saul's sinfulness was there for the world to see as he condemned the followers of Jesus. Jesus had Saul dead to rights, as God always has us in our sins, dead to rights. What was important to Jesus was that Saul knew that Jesus was putting his sins aside, because Jesus had important work for Saul to do, for the sake of God's love in

God’s world, in Jesus. Against all expectations, Saul was forgiven in Jesus, and sent out to the world, in Jesus, as an apostle of Jesus, named...Paul.

We may pray sometimes, and wonder, why don’t I feel God’s forgiveness? Why don’t I feel that new life, in Jesus? Why doesn’t Jesus hit me with a bright light, like Saul felt, and make it so clear to me that I am forgiven? Well, the truth is that God does this for us, in Jesus, every day. Every day, the light of God is there with us, and for us, like the sun is in the sky, with or without clouds. Against all expectations, God gives us a new chance, every day, to walk into the light of Jesus, no matter how many times we’ve stumbled, no matter how many times we’ve fallen short, no matter how many ways we’ve let God down.

To claim new life in Jesus, we must be ready for the unexpected forgiveness of Jesus, forgiveness that calls us to do what God wants us to do, in Jesus. We must let go of every expectation of being able to make God’s forgiveness happen. We can’t. Ever. But what we can do is to let God guide us, day by day, to accept the compassion offered to us by God, through Jesus, in our hearts, as we all try to proclaim God’s compassion in Jesus to God’s world. God forgives us, because God has compassionate things for us to do, in Jesus. We are the ones who Jesus turns to, asking us to offer the compassion of Christ to God’s world, as forgiven children of God, in Jesus. To feel God’s compassion for us, and in us, be ready to bring God’s compassion to the world like Jesus wants to bring it - not for our sake, not expecting favors, or recognition, but for the sake of what God has done for us, and for the sake of what God wants done in the world, for everyone. Go against all expectations. Let go of your fears of where accepting Jesus might take you. And then, like Saul, walk into God’s light, and be changed, forever. Amen.