



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker

June 30, 2019 Sermon

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## Tune My Heart to Sing Thy Grace

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 98, Luke 10:25-37

We all grew up in one moral ecology or another. We all create microcultures around us by the way we lead our lives and the vibes we send out to those around us. One of the greatest legacies a person can leave is a moral ecology—a system of belief and behavior that lives on after they die.—David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature—Abraham Lincoln, *First Inaugural Address*

Teach me some melodious sonnet; tune my heart to sing thy grace.—*Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*

### **Preface to First Scripture Lesson:**

“Teach me some melodious sonnet; tune my heart to sing thy grace.”

Those words are from the old hymn, “Come thou fount fo every blessing, which the choir is about to sing as an anthem for us. And if you want an example of a melodious sonnet, a melodious sonnet that tunes our hearts to sing God’s grace, you couldn’t do much better than our first Scripture lesson—Psalm 98.

Psalm 98 invites us—invites all of creation, in fact—to sing a new song to the lord, a song of joy because God, form God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, has done marvelous things for us. . . .

### **Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:**

In his book, *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks speaks of a “moral ecology.” A moral ecology is the social environment we human beings both inhabit and make—an environment that in so many ways—both explicit and implicit—tells us, yes, how things are, but more than that, how things *should* be, how *we* should live, the kinds of people we should be and try to become, and the kind of world we should make for, and share with, one another.

In the passage I’m about to read, Jesus tells a story that defines our moral ecology. That is, he tells us what our world, what the whole universe, really, is like. It is a universe defined by grace—God’s doing marvelous things for us, first and foremost in the person of the one telling the story. But more than that, Jesus tells us how things should be, how we should live, the kinds of people we should be and try to become, and the kind of world we should make for, and share with, one another.

It is a short and simple story. Yet its effects are impossible to enumerate.

This story has inspired so many people, this story has inspired so many acts of kindness and heroism, big and little—from fixing someone’s flat tire to feeding the hungry to seeking freedom for those denied it—this story has inspired so many movements and philanthropic endeavors—not to mention so many other stories and works of art—in short, this story has inspired so much goodness—that it has become both a metaphor and a name.

Nowadays, we call a person or persons, or even an institution, that gives aid to those in need a “Good Samaritan,” and think nothing of it. Yet in Jesus’ day, a “Good Samaritan” was a contradiction in terms—there was no such thing. Like a “good Michigan fan” in Ohio. Or a good Berniebro on Fox News or a good MAGA-hat wearer on MSNBC. Unthinkable. Inconceivable.

Yet with one story, Jesus makes the inconceivable a commonplace. And so, this one story tunes our hearts to God's grace. . . .

## **Sermon**

"We're all in this together" so David Brooks identifies the moral ecology dominant in America in the middle of the last century, a moral ecology that arose in response to the Great Depression and World War II.

With time, however, this moral ecology ran its course. And in response to the "dogmatism, political oppression, social prejudice, and group conformity" that afflicted that older moral ecology, a new one developed—starting in the 1960's—one that Brooks identifies as the "I'm Free to Be Myself" moral ecology.

Brooks' point is not to vilify the one and valorize the other. Instead, he wants to say that the "I'm Free to Be Myself" moral ecology has now also run its course: we're now afflicted with a kind of hyper-individualism with its accompanying loneliness, loss of meaning and purpose, and sense of distance—even disconnection—from other people and the world.

And his larger point is to say that our American culture is now at another pivotal moment, one in which a new moral ecology is taking shape, and this pivotal moment, like other, earlier ones, is characterized, yes, by uncertainty, confusion, and upheaval, but also by excitement, creativity, and reform.

To all of which I can only say: I don't know; I just don't know

Collectively, or at least on our op-ed pages and news feeds, I sometimes think we suffer from what I call "histrionic historicism": Just as stock market pundits have successfully predicted 1,982 of the past three bear markets, so cultural pundits have successfully predicted 1,983 of the past three cultural and historical revolutions.

Really: "We're all in this together" and "I'm free to be myself" have *both* been part of this country's moral fabric from the very beginning. To cite only one of a myriad of possible examples: those early Massachusetts Bay colonists, the Puritans, certainly had a "We're All In This Together" moral ecology, one that often seems, to us, dogmatic, oppressive, prejudiced, and unduly conformist. Hence the negative connotations of the word "puritanical." But they also had a "I'm Free to Be Myself" moral ecology—hence, Rhode Island. Really: the single, sole crop that New England Puritans produced unfailingly and in great abundance was religious dissenters. And they exported them to Rhode Island.

But even if these two tendencies—individual freedom and shared, common endeavor—have both been present throughout our history, that doesn't mean that they've both been *equally* present at *every* point in our history: after all, 2019 is not 1979 which was not 1939, which in turn was not 1639. So Brooks may have a point, and a thesis worth taking seriously. (I think he does.)

But to me the real question is not, "What will the next moral ecology look like?" but instead, "How do I—how do we—tune our hearts—to make it one worth having?"

The answer for me is . . . take a walk. That's right, take a walk. Turn off the TV, get off the computer screen, put away the smart phone, and take a walk—just a fifteen, twenty minute walk.

When I step *out* of our apartment, the first thing I set foot *on* is Trail#8, the Mad River Trail, part of the Miami Valley Bikeways, the nation's largest network of off-road paved trails, 330 miles in all, connecting ten counties.

Now, I know that this will come as a shock but I did not build that trail, much less the network. It has been—and continues to be—a shared, common endeavor of many people, of a community, in fact, of many communities. And

yet for me—and I'm hardly alone in this—that trail sings freedom: get on your bike and go; or put on your shoes and run, or at least run until my knees start to hurt, and then it's walk—back, slowly and painfully, and then I'm even more grateful for the paved trail.

And now that I've set foot on the trail, I look up and see the confluence of the five rivers. If anything represents the coming together of individual freedom and shared, common endeavor, of "I'm free to be myself" and "We're all in this together"—it may be the confluence of those five rivers. From the native Americans using them for agriculture, fishing, travel, trade, to the Thompson party coming upriver to found Dayton, to the role the rivers have played in trade and commerce throughout Dayton's history, to 1913—

Stop there: 1913. They called them "Morgan's Cowboys": the fifty or so engineers who worked under Arthur E. Morgan, who already, at age 35, was reputed to be the best hydraulic engineer in the country and led them in building the five dams that became the Miami Conservancy District, that was one part—an essential part, but only one part—of the not-for-profit Dayton Citizens' Relief Commission that helped Dayton recover from the Great Flood of 1913. It was a "we're all in this together" shared, common endeavor if ever there was one, and we live free from the fear of another 1913 because of it; Dayton is still Dayton because of it.

If you're catching my drift at this point, you're worried that a relatively short walk is about to become a very long sermon. I'm only ten feet from our apartment at this point: still to come: Riverscape park and the whole metro park system; looking across the river at the Art Institute; then the engineers' club and the fire department; a little more walking, and Cooper Park and the Dayton metro public library; DECA Middle and Stivers School for the Arts (Oh how I could go on about the library and the school as the two places, perhaps the two above all others where shared common endeavor and individual freedom come together!); the hospital; Think TV, Victoria Theater, the Schuster center, the arts annex and Levitt Pavilion; the United Way, the YWCA and the YMCA; the Department of Public Health, the water department, the county Public Defender's office, the courthouse, post office, and city hall, the sheriff's office and police department; Sinclair Community College; I could go on and on.

My point is *not* to keep you here until the Fourth of July. It is to say that we have a beautiful inheritance here; one that reflects and honors both individual freedom and shared common endeavor. As the Scripture puts it:

*God has given us great and goodly cities that we did not build, houses full of all good things that we did not fill, wells we did not dig, vineyards and olive trees, we did not plant . . .*

And this on just a twenty-minute walk. But too often we—I'll start with myself, but I think it's true for many of us—too often we tend to take all this for granted, walking right past it all without even noticing or thinking about it.

Which is why our hearts need to be tuned, which is why Jesus tells the Good Samaritan story—which is first of all a story about Jesus himself. Jesus is the Good Samaritan in the story: he is the despised outsider who offers life-saving aid when he has no obligation to do so. And we, first of all, are the beat-up guy in the ditch—we individually, we collectively as in all of humanity, we cosmically, the whole universe. Jesus is defining our moral ecology: he's telling us what our world, what the whole universe really, is like. It is a universe defined by grace, a grace that comes to us in him.

But we are also the lawyer asking Jesus the question: the lawyer who seems to have a certain willful blindness, and a defensive and self-justifying reluctance, about recognizing his neighbors. So Jesus is also telling us what our moral ecology *should* be: he's telling us how we should live, the kinds of people we should be and try to become, and the kind of world we should make for one another and share with one another.

And that means that I can't drive up Salem avenue, past what used to be the Good Samaritan Hospital, and look the other way, thinking, "Well, at least I have access to good health care." It means I can't drive up I-75, looking neither to my left or my right, thinking, "Well, at least our apartment didn't get hit by the tornadoes. And it means I can't scroll through my news feed, past the stories about our southern border, thinking, "Well, at least my kids have toothpaste and soap."

Jesus—not to mention Morgan’s Cowboys—requires more of us. And I know, I know: it’s hard to know what to do; it’s easy to feel overwhelmed: I feel that, too: I’m just one person; we’re just one church; Dayton is just one city. But Jesus is not asking us to save the world—that’s his job—he’s asking us to do what we can, which for most of us means doing more than we are doing now. One of my favorite heroines put it this way when describing how we should tune our hearts to grace:

*That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil--widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.*

Desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don’t quite know what it is, matters because inheritances can be—inheritances have been—squandered, both individually and culturally. The Roman Republic did not fall because an emperor was inevitable. It fell because of the political corruption, social division, and indifference to goodness and truth that preceded—and paved the way for—the emperor’s ascent to power. And so we, too, as a country, could well squander our inheritance of individual freedom and shared, common endeavor.

Which is why it’s important to take a walk. To turn off the TV, get off the computer screen, put away the smart phone, and take a walk—just a fifteen, twenty minute walk. Because so much of what is on our TV’s, computer screens, and smartphones has the wrong moral ecology: a moral ecology defined not by our shared, common endeavor, but by our shared common enemies; this moral ecology has been identified as “negative partisanship”—where all that we share on “our” side is a virulent hatred for the other side—be they Berniebros or MAGA hat-wearers. And so we surrender both our shared, common endeavor AND our individual freedom to the prison of hatred. Negative partisanship—to have our identities defined by our enmities . . . well, it’s not a happy place.

Please hear me: I’m not trying to paper over our political and social disagreements by saying that they don’t matter. They do. And our faith requires us to take them seriously. But where we do disagree, we must pay one another the compliment of rational disagreement—again something that is all too often absent from the world our screens.

And again I recognize that it’s a difficult problem: how do you rationally disagree when no one is listening to reason? But I don’t think our broader public discussion (as opposed to some of our online discussions) has yet reached the point where no one is listening to reason, and if it has, well . . .well then heaven help us. But before we lose hope, remember that—with one story—Jesus makes the inconceivable commonplace.

Our time is not the first time—nor the worst time—in our nation’s history, when we’ve been threatened by internal divisions. As he assumed office in 1861, Abraham Lincoln said this:

*We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*

So this week, take a walk. And later in the week, as you’re watching the fireworks—as the whistles, booms and bangs fill the air, as the light fills the night sky—think of those mystic chords of memory, those streams of mercy never ceasing, sung by flaming tongues above.

And may the better angels of our nature tune our hearts to sing God’s grace.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.