

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
July 29, 2018
Living Differently – Won't You Be My Neighbor
Heather Zempel

I am going to miss that trailer and singing that song every weekend. What an incredible journey we've been on over the past seven weeks. What is the greatest commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second is like it to love your neighbor as yourself. And to explain that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, this unlikely hero that shows us that our vertical love for God is reflected in and defined by our horizontal love for one another. We talked about the importance of changing the narrative, what happens when we share the story that God is writing in our lives and we engage the stories that God is writing in the lives of others. Dr Foth talked about the great banquet and we're confronted with this idea that the family of God might be bigger than anything we ever imagined. Talked about the faith of those tenacious friends and learned that someone else's miracle might be on the other side of our vulnerability of our sweat, of our faith. Pastor Mark talked about throwing better parties even if they're just three minute parties to celebrate the abundant life that Jesus gives to us and to invite others into that reality. We talked about crossing cultures with the Jerusalem Council. We talked about controlling our calendars with Casa Chirilagua.

One of our prayers for this series has been that this would not just be a series of sermons to be listened to, but sermons to be lived out and you guys are living them out. Miss Sharon is one of our most beloved members and volunteers at our Barracks Row Campus and for several months she hasn't had her electric wheelchair. And so on Saturday night a group of her friends go and pick her up, bring her here so she could attend service and then go to dinner. And then on Sunday morning the hospitality team goes to get her so she could come and serve at all three services. It's a story that sounds a little bit like those tenacious friends.

And then at our Gainesville Campus we've got a group called the Crocus Collective that is seeking to cross cultures and build relationships with the Turkish Muslim community. And they told a story about a lady who had come here. She was seeking refuge and she thought that the United States was just going to be a temporary stop on her way to Canada because in her vulnerability she expressed, I didn't think that this country was going to welcome me, but because of the hospitality and the friendship that she found with our friends at Gainesville, she has decided to make this her home.

And let me tell you something. Yeah, you can clap for that and clap just for our Gainesville campus.

Our kids are crushing it. Lyla Claire at Potomac Yard Campus decided to throw a three minute party for the life guard in her community pool. He's a young man from Turkey and his English skills aren't that great. And so the way they communicate with one another is by giving each other high fives. And so Lyla Claire made him a card and drew an outline of her hand that said, I can give you a high five anytime now. And then he posted that on his instagram. She's like an instant success and you know, full of fame in Turkey.

The Hampton kids at our Ballston location decided to stock a cooler with drinks and with snacks for their mailman and then left a little note to say, 'Hey, we want to bless you.' Marcos at our Ballston Campus wanted to help a neighbor find a lost cat and he drew pictures and made signs and posted them around the neighborhood and you know what? They found the cat! And then the owner of the cat brought cupcakes over for the kids. Being a neighbor is fun!

And so this weekend we're talking about living differently. If you have a Bible, go ahead and turn over to Matthew 25. Now granted, every week we have been talking about living differently in some way. We've been talking about making a difference in the lives of others, but what this weekend is about is permanent, tangible shifts and a lifestyle. We don't want this to be a series that ends and we just move on to something else and we pat ourselves on the back for all the good projects we did. This isn't about checking off some boxes of sermon applications from week to week and then moving onto something else, but a realization that being a good neighbor is a life that must be lived. Now, obviously this series was inspired in part by a childhood classic Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

Mr. Rogers was a man who decided to live life differently. He invited a man by the name of François Clemmons to be a regular on the show. Now, this was a very unlikely friendship. François Clemmons was a gay black man and Mr Rogers was a very buttoned up conservative Presbyterian Pastor. And he asked François Clemmons to come on the show to play the role of the neighborhood Officer Clemmons. It was a role that at first Clemmons rejected because his view of the police was not very positive because of the violence he'd experienced in the Civil Rights movement. But he made a bold decision to take a risky step to play that role and portray that character. He became the first African American with a recurring role on a kid's TV program.

There was one particular episode in 1969 when Mr. Rogers was cooling his feet at a kid's swimming pool and Officer Clemmons comes by and Mr. Rogers invited him to cool his feet in that same pool. Now, today, and even when I was a kid, I had no idea how monumental that moment was, but at that time in history, others were being forced out of swimming pools and there was a picture of Mr. Rogers and Officer Clemmons sharing a moment in the pool with their feet cooling off together. It was those two men making a gentle but very powerful statement in the midst of violence in the Civil Rights movement. It was those men with a prophetic imagination and activation in a subtle way that communicated something very important. Now, I realize that one of the tensions and the sensitivities in my sharing that story is there's a tendency for us to make the white man the hero of the story. And I know that there is a sensitivity there, but what I want us to think about is these two men that made a decision to live differently with subtle yet prophetic imagination and activation. And what I want us all to be invited into is this idea that what if we lived differently across our seven locations, all of our podcast listeners, if we made a decision that regardless of our backgrounds, our stories, our personalities, that we're going to practice a lifestyle of radically including and radically inviting others to be a part of our lives.

Matthew 25, ³¹ *"But when the Son of Man^[d] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. ³² All the nations^[e] will be gathered in his presence, and he*

will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

³⁴ *“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. ³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’ ³⁷ “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? ³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’*

⁴⁰ *“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, ^[U] you were doing it to me!’ ⁴¹ “Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. ^[G] ⁴² For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink. ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’*

⁴⁴ *“Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?’*

⁴⁵ *“And he will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.’*

⁴⁶ *“And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.”*

All right, the first comment I want to make about this passage is we have a tendency to think that the God of the Old Testament was cranky and angry and judgmental and kind of in a bad mood. And somewhere between the Old Testament and the New Testament he liked, got saved. And Jesus is like the kind, totally inclusive, nonjudgmental, happy God. And yet this passage sounds a little bit like Old Testament God. And I bring this up today; it has nothing to do with the message. I just want to point out to us that what we find in the Bible is not two different gods or a god with two different personalities or a God who is changing his personality. We see God's grace and mercy in the Old Testament and we also see his judgment in the New Testament. In fact, I would argue that the book of Revelation is the bloodiest book in the whole Bible. Again, I'm on a rabbit trail. Let me get back to the point.

So in Matthew 25, Jesus tells three stories about what the Kingdom of God will look like. He says, look, I'm going to paint you a picture of what my kingdom looks like. At first he tells the story of 10 bridesmaids who are waiting on the bridegroom and five of them brought extra oil for their lamps and five of them did not. And so five of them didn't go to the wedding because they weren't prepared. And then he tells the story of these three servants, and when the master goes away, he gives one servant five bags of silver and another servant, three bags of silver and another servant one bag of silver. And when he comes back, he finds that the one, two who need given five had doubled it. The one to whom he had given three, doubled it, the one who had

given one to had dug a hole and buried in the ground. So Jesus, the master, snatches that bag away, gives it to the one that now has 10. And then the master says to the man, and I quote, "send him into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Yeah, there's that kind, happy, saved, nonjudgmental Jesus again. But then he talks in his last story about sheep being separated from the goats. He says, this is how people will be separated out. It's according to whether or not they fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, visited the one in prison, cared for the one who was sick, welcomed the stranger. All three of these stories point to the idea that what we do matters and what don't do matters.

A lot of times in the church, we focus a lot on sins of commission. What we do wrong, what we do that is bad, what we do that is outside God's perfect will. What Jesus is addressing in Matthew 25 in all three of these accounts are sins of omission, the good things that we don't do. Pastor Mark has often said that we can do nothing wrong and still do nothing right. I think for a lot of us living differently has often come down to this idea of not doing the bad stuff that people out there do or taking a strong stand for our convictions.

Growing up for me it was we were immersed in this thing called a culture war. And when I was in middle school, I decided that I was going to take some bold stands for what I believed. And that often showed up in the form of the music that I listened to, the movies that I watched and even the clothes that I wore. I had a dog tag that said, I am the Christian the devil warns you about. I don't even know what that means or why I thought it was a good idea to wear it. And it is amazing that I had any friends at all. But that was my idea of living differently.

I somehow lost where I was in my notes. Okay. I think I actually jumped ahead, but that's okay.

Another point I want to make about this passage is that a lot of times we tend to interpret this as take care of all the people that need help out there and when Jesus is talking about the story, he's talking specifically about those who are part of the family of God. And we know this because he talks about brothers and sisters and so it's not saying, hey, take care of everybody, all the people out there and that's how sheep and goats will be separated, but how are you caring for the body of Christ, the church, the family of God? Now, this doesn't in any way discount or devalue the other places where he talks about caring for everyone, whether they're inside the four walls of the church are not the Mosaic Law, the cries of the prophets. The story of the Good Samaritan itself says, take care of everyone everywhere, but this story is specifically about how we care for one another. And I bring that up again just because one of my pet peeves is when we teach right doctrine from wrong texts, and so let's just make sure we have interpretation right and also want to say that this doesn't include when I say the church, the family of God, the body of Christ, I don't just mean National Community Church, I'm talking about the church around the world, the persecuted church, the hidden church, the forgotten church. I'm talking about people like Daoud Nasser who has a farm, he's a Palestinian Christian, and that farm has been threatened over and over and over again, and yet he chooses the path of peaceful resistance. I'm talking about the church that is huddled in the underground in China. I'm talking about the church that is in the rural places of our nation, in Appalachia and the south and the Midwest. Do we know their stories? Do we know the places where they have chosen faith over fear? Do we care about the things that they're going through? Do we care about our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now, this idea of living differently goes all the way back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. When he stood up for the first time in the synagogue and he was handed the scroll and he opened it up and it's the scroll of Isaiah and he read, "the spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He then sat down and said, today, this scripture is fulfilled.

I think it's interesting that when Jesus stood up to announce who he was and what he was about when he gave his first mission statement, it had nothing to do with changing beliefs, ushering in a new covenant, he didn't mention dying on a cross, didn't say anything about solving a sin problem. He said, it's about sights, it's about vision, it's about freedom, it's about caring for the poor. Now, did he shake up belief systems and usher in a new covenant? Did he die an extraordinary death as a sacrifice on a cross and experience an unprecedented and unexpected resurrection? Absolutely! But what Jesus is talking about here is more than solving a personal individual sin problem. It is much bigger than that. It's about ushering in a new kingdom and that's why in Matthew 25 when he talks about how the faithful will be rewarded, it's all about how we fulfill that mission. It's about orthopraxy, which is right doing, more than orthodoxy what we believe. I'm not saying that what we believe doesn't matter because I think that often we have to think our way into right ways of acting. Good theology when in its proper place leads us to right action, to being on mission, to fulfilling the great commission and the great commandment, but there are also moments where we have to act our way into right ways of thinking. Living differently doesn't just mean somehow planting our foot in the ground and drawing a line and trying to be different from culture. It's not about wearing dog tags that have stupid sayings on them. Maybe it's less about what we abstain from and having our theology all in proper order and making sure we're at church every time the doors are open. Maybe what matters most is how we care for the least.

The early church followed in the footsteps of Jesus on this. The early church garnered the attention of the ancient world because of the way they lived, the dignity that they placed upon people, the value they extended to people. The early church lived under Roman occupation and according to Roman law, slaves could not own property. Women were treated as lesser beings. If a Roman father didn't want his child, he could leave the baby in a field to die, and yet the church stepped in and the church adopted unwanted children. The church treated slaves and women as equal heirs in the Kingdom of God. They challenged the status quo. They defied the fabric and the structure of Roman society by extending value to every person and radically welcoming people into their midst. That caught the attention of the Roman Empire. It wasn't what they believed, in fact; the Romans didn't think that their belief system was all that impressive. The Roman Empire thought that Jesus' followers were godless or atheists because when you only worship one God against the backdrop of the numerous gods of the Acropolis, that faith looked awfully weak and anemic. It wasn't what they believed that stood out. It was how they acted and what they did. Emperor Julian said, it is a scandal that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well. Well, those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them. He couldn't stand the notion that anyone would think that anything was more noble and good and benevolent than the Roman Empire. And this emperor said, let us not permit others to excel us in good deeds. What if our culture said that about the church today?

Aristides was the second century, Athenian philosopher, and he said, because of Christians, good flows on in the world.

So how do we do at the early church did? How do we follow in the footsteps of Jesus? I think the first thing we have to do is recognize the importance of presence. Do we take the time to just stop, to look, to notice, to see, to be present in the midst of pain and suffering? Jesus was very comfortable with that. When his friend Lazarus died, we read this moment where it's the shortest verse in all of scripture for us kids that grew up in church. This was our favorite memory verse because it's two words. Jesus wept. And if we aren't careful, we will read right over the emotion and the vulnerability and the humanity of that, Jesus wept. He was willing to simply be present in the midst of suffering and pain.

I think our presence is often the greatest gift we can give. When my granddaddy went into hospice on Christmas Eve, Ruth was there. When I went through a season of really wrestling with matching up what I believed in my faith and how my life was going, Ryan was just there and he kept showing up over and over and over again. When I brought a new baby home for the first time, Jody and Lena and Joel were there. The moment I got the word that my Gran had passed away, Emily was there. They were just there. I don't remember the words they said, if there were any at all that were said, but I remember that they were present. Presence is the greatest gift God gives to us. He doesn't promise deliverance from the Valley of Shadow of Death. He promises his presence in the midst of it. And here's the deal, when we are present with God and then we go and be present with people, we usher the presence of God into that situation, into the midst of unending darkness and unsolvable problems and undeniable pain and unanswerable questions. We bring the presence of God in.

And then here's the cool thing. We spend time in the presence of God and then we're present with others and when we look in the eyes of the others, Jesus says, we see his face. We have the unbelievable privilege of seeing his face in the oppressed and the lonely and the stranger and the sick and the prisoner, in the poor. We can't fix every problem, we can't address every need, we don't have the resources to give to everyone, but we can be present. And it is our presence that gives us permission to then change the narrative and throw some parties and invite Jesus into the circumstance.

We have to be present and then I think we also have to take action. It's not our best intentions or good thoughts or well wishes that change circumstances. It was not the intentions of the early church, but their actions that got the attention of the Roman Empire. It is not our intentions, but our actions that get attention for the Gospel. We have to recognize that Jesus' greatest demonstration of love towards us was not a good thought he had about us, but an action he took on our behalf.

The cries of the prophet Isaiah echo across history is it the fast I choose to break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and to tear off every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see them and to not ignore your own flesh and blood? And 800 years later, Jesus is quoting the same thing when he talks about what his kingdom looks like. In the book of Acts, we read in chapter two that the believers sold their possessions so they could give

to those who were in need. We also read that they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. They took action.

Now we want to make this really practical NCC. And so, we have a tool, a community called A1:8 Commons. It's all about connecting the resources in our community with the needs in our community. This is a very practical way to live differently and to put that into practice. So we want to show you a quick video and then I'll be right back.

{ Video }

Lora Batterson, National Community Church: For years we've been asking the question "How can we connect the vast need in our community with the incredible resources that we have as a church.

Chelsea Geyer, Executive Director DC127, NCC Partner Organization: A lot of us have resources that we give and that we can share, we just don't know who needs them.

Lora Batterson, National Community Church: How can we get those to come together and that's A1:8 Commons.

Christina Titus, Refugee Care Team, Volunteer: We're surrounded by need all around us. Everything from refugee care, to people experiencing homelessness, to foster care. You think about the area we live in, it's very transient, right, so you have people coming and going all the time. And you have people who are like, trying to downsize.

Chelsea Geyer, Executive Director DC127, NCC Partner Organization: Commons allows us to take what we have and directly give it to people in our community who need it who we would have never otherwise met.

Christina Titus, Refugee Care Team, Volunteer: Being able to put out there this is what I'm looking for and then actually having people meet those needs.

Chelsea Geyer, Executive Director DC127, NCC Partner Organization: As a non-profit partner, we use the A1:8 Commons to fill needs for our foster families and for our families who are trying to keep their kids out of foster care. We need car seats, we need pack and plays all the time. We need metro cards. We need grocery gift cards. It makes the giant hurdles they're facing just a little bit easier and it tells them they're not alone.

Dave Schmidgall, A1:8 Director: It honestly keeps me up at night this idea of our community at large has these skills and resources to provide those that need it most in our community. And it's how do we mobilize people to do that better so we can look like the early church that was able to do that and reflect Christ's love in such tangible ways. Commons is that ability.

Prince Morgan: I was in the street for 15 years and now I'm in this apartment. I didn't know I needed it, but I did. (Pointing in the cupboard to kitchen utensils) This came from NCC, this

came from NCC, all these came from NCC, these plates. It tells me I'm not alone in this world. I'm very proud to have this place.

Dave Schmidgall, A1:8 Director: We tried to work really hard at making it easy to use and we think it is. You're able to post needs and resources and also be able to fulfill those.

Chelsea Geyer, Executive Director DC127, NCC Partner Organization: The Commons is just a tool to allow the church to be the church.

Lora Batterson, National Community Church: Everything is an experiment at NCC, so yeah, this is an experiment.

Sign up and get started Commons.Aoneight.org

{End Video}

Some of you need to just take your phones out right now and go to that website. You can ignore me for the rest of the message. You will never hear a preacher say that. But it's that important. I think too, for too long the church has created tools and resources to keep people busy and out of trouble. This is a tool and a resource that makes it very practical and easy to live differently. Living differently is not that hard. It's just about a mindset and a little bit of intentionality. It's about being present, be present because we realize our presence gives us permission to make change and that it's not our intentions, but our action that gets the attention of the world.

In John 17, verse 20, Jesus prayed, 20 *"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. 21 I pray that they all be one, just as you and I are one—just as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."*

Theologian and author Francis Shaffer called this the final apologetic. Apologetics is a branch of theology that's concerned with evidence and proof of the historicity of Jesus. the authenticity and reliability of the Bible. It's about proof for God's existence and that the Christian faith is worth following. And yet Francis Shaffer says this, that Jesus talks about in John 17, that's the final apologetic, that it's our observable unity, our tangible love, our actionable faith that gives the ultimate final best proof that Jesus is real and he is who he says that he is. It's the highest evidence we can offer the world that the good news of Jesus is real. Love one another, your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. What's the most important commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself, but who is the neighbor? The one who showed mercy? Go and do likewise.

Father, I thank you for your word. I thank you for your story. I thank you that you have invited us to your table, that you've invited us into your family, that you have invited us to play a role in the story you're writing in our nation and in our generation, God may we radically invite others into our lives, to our tables. God, I pray that we would be people who are known for being present in the midst of pain. And like you, we would so deeply identify with the hurting and the

sick and the poor and the oppressed. And that we would recognize that when we sit in those places and when we look into those eyes that we're actually looking into your eyes. God, may we take bold action. Action that is sacrificial, that is loving, and that radically invites people into your kingdom. God, help us to love you by loving others. May we be good neighbors, change us in Jesus' name. Amen.