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Sermon
July 27, 2025

Texts: John 14:15 -21, Matthew 22:36 -40

“Keep My Commandments”

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” says Jesus to his disciples. He knows that his time with them is shortly coming to an end. Jesus knows that he has taught them many things during his three-year ministry. And he has left them with a greatest commandment, one that sums up all the other hundreds of commandments that they have been trying to keep since the time of Moses, He says the greatest commandment is that “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

And then he said the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You know that seems so very clear to me and yet, so many folks over so many centuries have tried to find a way out of the “loving your neighbor” thing, right? “Who exactly is my neighbor?” people have asked. People who live on my street? People who come to my church? People whose kids go to school with my kids? ...

Well, I think that Jesus has been pretty clear about the folks that we are to love. He made it clear when he kicked off his public ministry in the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth,

He said,

*‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ -Luke 4:18 – 19*

That was at the start of his ministry, and he closed out his ministry on the same note:

He said:

*For I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.
...
Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these,
you did not do it to me.’*

Seems as if the neighbors that we are to love must include the list of folks that Jesus said he came for.

“If you love me, keep my commandments.” You know, I find it so interesting that some folks in our nation want to post The Ten Commandments in public schools BUT I have not heard any clamor about posting what Jesus said is the GREATEST COMMANDMENT! “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

One of the ways that many folks in our nation today, have strayed from this commandment of Jesus has to do with our attitudes toward the poor. We as a nation don't seem to be about bringing good news to the poor. I think we have a collective indifference to the plight of the poor an indifference that stems, I think, from the **myths** that we have about poor people

So let me dispel some of those myths.

One **myth** is that **most** poor people in America are Black. But it just ain't so! In 2023, there were 37,900,000 people living below the Federal poverty line. Of that number, 44% are white people, 28% are Hispanic and only 20% are Black, another 8% listed as other. Now, it is difficult to find that statistic because most often a search of real, reliable, statistically valid internet sources will give you a poverty **rate** rather than actual numbers of people. And the rate of poor people who are Black compared to the total number of Black people in the whole US population is indeed the highest **rate** of poverty in America. All that to say, that poor white people are the collateral damage of a nation whose attitudes toward the poor have been and increasingly are driven by racism.

And our nation's anti-Black racism has spun the tail hat most poor people are lazy because of the **myth** that Black people are lazy or that they are living with the consequences of their own poor choices and therefore, undeserving of our help.¹ That **we** good folks have worked hard for what we have and so should they, we tell ourselves, assuming that they don't work, **our next myth about poor Americans.**

Truth is, the vast majority of poor people work one, two, even three jobs. These “poor people are Black and don't work” myths have allowed us to move our national conscience far from President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty from so many decades ago. These myths have allowed us to stop worrying about poor folks.

Now, I am sure that many of you don't feel this way, that's why I love UCC folks. But that is the way that our national conscience has moved over the last few decades.

Another **myth** to dispel as we talk about poor Americans Is the number of the people who officially count as poor according to the federal poverty line, which was set back in the mid-1960s. Those living below that line are not the only people living with their backs against the wall, as 20th century mystic Howard Thurman would say. The reason: the Federal poverty line is set at an income of \$14,000 a year for an individual or \$28,000 a year for a family of four.

But really what person can live on \$1,167 a month in America?

¹ William Barber, II: *White Poverty: How Exposing Myths About Race and Class can Reconstruct American Democracy*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 2024), 6.

One rule of thumb about income is that the cost of one's housing should take no more than 30% of one's income but a survey of states shows that rents actually range on average from 39% of that Federal poverty line in Arkansas to 88% in New Hampshire.(Hawaii's is 92% but I didn't want you to dismiss the statistics because, hey, who can afford to live in Hawaii?).

Even here in Connecticut where the minimum wage just increased to \$16.35 an hour that nets a person working a 40 hour-a-week, minimum wage job a little over \$28,000 a year after taxes. That's a take home income of about \$2,333 a month. CT's average rent for a 2-bedroom apartment is \$2,000 a month (according to Zillow), and that leaves only \$333 to cover utilities, food, healthcare, transportation and other basic necessities and that is assuming that you can even get a minimum wage job that will actually be a full 40 hours a week!

You know, the average worker in America makes \$54 a week **less** than they did 50 years ago; after adjusting for inflation² according to the Rev. Dr. William Barber, whose latest book is *White Poverty: How Exposing Myths About Race and Class Can Reconstruct American Democracy*. (His is one of the books on the suggested readings that I provided)

In other words, there are lots more poor folks in our nation that the Federal poverty numbers don't include and most of them are white people.

Today, 1 in 5 children in our nation is food insecure and that in this richest nation on earth. That is SIN.

You know, many times after I preach, folks will tell me they really enjoyed my speech. Now, I like the sentiment, but this is not a speech. This is a sermon. What's the difference? Well, according to The Reverend Marilyn Kendrix a sermon is a speech that is grounded in scripture, the Bible...that guide that we Christians should use to define how we should be living our lives.

So, what does scripture say about poverty. Believe me, it says a LOT! A search of the text provided me with over 200 scriptural references that deal with the poor or how the rich should act toward the poor and that was only those that actually use the word "poor." I have read that all the scriptural references to justice for the marginalized in the Bible, the count is about 2,000.

You know, our national attitude toward the poor has not always been like it is today. In 1975, the War on Poverty had cut childhood poverty in half and poverty among seniors was reduced by 60%. In raw numbers, the majority of the people who were lifted up were white and ending poverty wasn't framed as a Democratic or Republican issue.

It was not understood as a left or right issue. It was championed as a moral issue that impacts all of us. As Rev. Barber writes, "It's not about partisanship. It's about people." In the words of the Kerner Commission report that spurred President Johnson's war on poverty: "everybody does better when everybody does better."³

² Ibid, 9

³ Ibid, 59.

The fact is that since that time, the middle class has shrunk **from** 61% of the population **then**, to 50% of the population today⁴, And that's not because all those middle-class folks are now rich! They have not boot-strapped their way to true abundance. No, those folks no longer in the middle class have moved in the other direction, falling into poverty. The truth is that in the years since the War on Poverty, poor people have been abandoned by America's leadership and now, there's all-out war, not on poverty, but on poor people. People act like it's a crime to be poor, when actually, it is criminal the way that the poor are treated in this country!

At this time in America, this war on the poor hides in so many different ways. When we hope to eliminate the department of Education and rob public education funds by using tax dollars to give out vouchers for private education, we want to undermine public education which is where most poor children are educated.

When we eliminate HUD funds that help with rent for the poorest Americans, we want to increase the numbers of people are homeless.

When we seek to eliminate diversity in government and private industry, we want to eliminate opportunity for people who have already boot-strapped themselves into the middle class.

When we try to abolish any work seeking environmental justice, we are saying that locating toxic waste dumps in poor communities and making those folks sick is perfectly okay.

When we shut down the US Agency for International Development or USAID, we are trying to export our disdain for the poor to the poorest nations on earth. There are many different ways that this new war manifests.

When we pass BIG BEAUTIFUL BILLS that reduce SNAP, the nutrition assistance for poor folks and reduce Medicaid, healthcare for poor folks, we are showing our disdain for the folks that Jesus loved best, neighbors that Jesus would have us love.

The Congressional Budget office estimated that more than 7 million Americans would no longer have any health insurance with the passage of this BIG BEAUTIFUL BILL.

What difference does all this make?

Well in 2010, the Affordable Care Act funded the expansion of Medicaid providing medical insurance for folks officially living below the official federal poverty line. But several states, ironically, those with large poor populations, refused the Federal money and that caused some hospitals, which were the only emergency healthcare located in poor, rural areas, to close. The solution was supposed to be that when poor folks in those areas need hospitalization, they would be helicoptered to a big regional hospital an hour away.

Sounds good, right?

⁴ Ibid, 73.

Well, let me provide an example of what can happen when Medicaid is gutted. You can read this example and others in Rev. Barber's recent book.

One rural nonprofit hospital was purchased by a for profit outfit, and you know what happened. After they squeezed all the money they could out of the hospital they closed it down. Well, one woman, Portia Gibbs, was living in that rural North Carolina town, when she suffered a heart attack on her front lawn. Her husband and one of her children drove her to the local EMT station. They called ahead to let them know they were coming and why. Four EMTs put her into an ambulance and got her stabilized, but they told her husband they needed to call for a helicopter to get her to the nearest hospital in Norfolk, Virginia. They waited for 45 minutes during which time the EMT's had to resuscitate her several times. By the time the helicopter got there, Portia was dead.⁵ Statistics would say she died of a heart attack, but I think she could be counted among those who die from poverty.

She was just one of the victims of a system that sees hospitals for poor rural folks as ATM machines to be emptied and then closed down when the money runs out. This is just one example of why statistics show us that poverty is the **fourth** leading cause of death in America – behind obesity, behind diabetes, behind deaths by firearms.

The fact is, according to Rev. Barber, 800 people die of poverty a day in this richest nation in the world. Jesus said, that when we care for "least of these," we care for him.

Well, Rev. Barber says that the only thing that makes a nation exceptional is the way she cares for the least of these.⁶ You know, poverty isn't a rare glitch in the US economy. Poverty is a **feature** of the way our economy is designed.⁷

In the last six months, we've all been witness to an escalation of the war on poor people – struggling as the social safety net is obliterated; be they immigrants coming to our nation, crossing borders that God never drew because they are running from their **own** tyrants and they can't find a way to feed their children in the places they are coming from or our own home-grown poor folks – who are legion.

We can foresee a huge increase in the numbers of **US citizens** without a means to care for themselves and their families as departments of the federal government meant to help the poorest of the poor, are shuttered and folks are sent home, now among the jobless. I can think of no reason for all this other than **evil greed**. Robbing the poor to give to the rich. It's kind of an anti-Robin Hood kind of thing. In Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul calls greed what it really is: idolatry. And according to Cameron Trimble, greed is not just a personal vice. It has become the organizing principle of our economy.

The late biblical scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann, taught that greed is a violation of neighborly relationships, a refusal of covenantal obligation, and a repudiation of divine generosity.⁸ It is not simply an unfortunate trait.

⁵ Ibid, 85.

⁶ Ibid, 104.

⁷ Ibid, 128.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "Walter Brueggemann on Greed," Annotate on YouTube.

Greed is a deliberate rejection of God's vision for life together.

You know, I've spent the last 12 years "raising awareness" about injustice in our nation, first about mass incarceration and then about systemic racism. But I no longer want to "raise awareness."

Today, I am all about **motivating action** to bring justice to our land for all of us, white and brown and black and in-between, rich and poor and in-between, gay and straight and trans and in-between.

This is a time when **justice** work is called for.

I saw a cartoon on Facebook the other day. It showed Jesus standing apart from some other people, and he says, "Just love. It's not complicated. You only complicate it because you don't want to do it."

Every day we need to see what's going on in our nation, and ask ourselves, what would we do if we loved them? What would we do if we really want to keep his commandments? If we intend to be true followers of Jesus Christ, then we need to do more than put up a sign. We need to do more than listen to the news of the nation and become **so sad** about it that we stop believing that we can **do** anything about it and we just sit in our sadness. We need to tap into our righteous anger and let it motivate us into action.

We true Christians, we followers of Jesus, we need to get out there and do something. What can you do? Well, you can advocate for housing for poor people. What can you do?" You can educate yourself about upcoming legislation and call your representatives or Senators to vote in favor if it helps poor people or against if it makes things worse.

What can you do? u can advocate for small hospitals to remain open and against the venture capitalists who want to rob them.

What can you do? You can vote for candidates who have shown they care about people who are poor in this rich nation. You do not have to vote your pocketbook. You can vote your Christian values instead and if enough of us vote our values, we can make a movement, If enough of us get out and protest our nation's war on the poor, we can make a movement, a real Jesus movement. And Lord knows we need a movement of moral people, to take to the streets and demand a change. We need a movement of moral people to rise up and say **enough!** We need a movement of moral people to take back the nation, to wage war once again on poverty, to bring back love and justice and mercy. to be God's hands and feet in the world!

We need a movement!

I pray for a movement!

May it be so. Ashe and Amen.

John 14:15 – 21

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Matthew 22:36- 40

36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

37 He said to him, " "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

38 This is the greatest and first commandment.

39 And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."