Theme: The Line Dividing Good and Evil
“Evil in the Name of God”
Sermon preached by Jeff Huber
February 1-2, 2014 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Scripture: Exodus 20:7 and Ephesians 4:29-32

7 You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.

29 Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

30 And do not bring sorrow to God’s Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption.

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. 32 Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

VIDEO The Line Dividing Good and Evil Week 5 Sermon Starter
SLIDE Evil in the Name of God

I got a communication from our conference office about something happening to a number of United Methodist pastors and staff persons in churches. It seems that someone was setting up Facebook pages for different pastors by taking their pictures off of Facebook and other things and creating a fake identity. They then would invite members of those pastor’s churches to be their friend. People would become their friends on Facebook and then the person pretending to be the pastor would ask if there was something they could pray for or in some ways they could be an encouragement. It all sounded very genuine until the fake pastor would then ask for help from the church members with a mission trip. They would ask for routing numbers and bank account information or give bank account information for an account in Africa or some other part of the world and encourage people to give to that.

I want to be clear with all of you that I will never ask you for any money on my Facebook page or via the Internet or an e-mail. I will do that in church, but not on-line! When I think about somebody taking advantage of people that way it makes me pretty angry. Especially since most of those people who are taken advantage of in schemes like that are people who have good hearts and who
genuinely want to help people. So if you get it e-mail from someone pretending to be me and using broken English and asking for money, then please be assured that even though my English isn't perfect I would never approach you for money that way. Please do call the office and let us know about things like that seem fishy to you. I might ask you for money in a worship service or for a special offering for each year when we do stewardship, but I will always reserve the right to do that!

Invitation to take out Message Notes and Meditation Moments

This type of manipulation and deceptions made me think about how God must feel with all the things that people do in God's name, acting as though God is giving a blessing upon that activity that God would never ask human beings to do. That leads me to this sermon on, “Evil in the Name of God.” In particular, I was thinking about the third commandment. We typically state the third commandment by saying,

SLIDE "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."

We often think that's about cussing. I'm not in favor of cussing and I try really hard not to take God's name in vain in that way and I certainly don't think we should use God's name that way for anything. God's name is holy and is meant to be revered. Our Jewish friends won't even say the technical name for God in the Hebrew Bible. Those who are devout Jews, when they write God in written language, will write G_D as opposed to even accidentally saying something about God which would defame his name or misuse it in some way.

As much as I do want to encourage you not to take God's name in vain when you cuss, that is not really what the third commandment was written for and not the way was meant to be applied. The third commandment is primarily about invoking God's name and associating it with things that God would never want his name associated with. It also was meant as a prohibition for using God's name for one's personal gain. I want us to try and remember that as we spend some time on this topic today. I also want to invite you to recite the third commandment together with me aloud which you will find on the video screen from the New Living Testament, Exodus 20:7.

SLIDE You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.

For the remainder of this sermon we will talk about how people have misused the name of God and in the end I'm going to challenge you to be the kind
of people who represent God well. Let's start by talking about those ways that people sometimes misuse God or represent God poorly.

First, I want to recognize that there are some people who are just posers. They might have started off actually believing in God and wanting to do the right thing but somewhere along the way their faith died or became very distorted. In the end, they use God to gratify their own needs and desires and wants. All of us come to God hoping that God will bless us or encourage us in some way. But I also think we are meant to grow to a place where we recognize that our faith is not really about “me” and getting what I want. Our faith is meant to be about loving God and honoring God and blessing other people. Some people never move to that place where they figure that out and instead they believe it really is all about them and they end up using God to get what they want. This has always been the case as long as humans have been around. In the Old Testament we find Ezekiel speaking to the religious leaders of Israel when he says these words in chapter 34:2b and following.

SLIDE 2b What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn’t shepherds feed their sheep? 3 You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. 4 You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty.

God, through Ezekiel, is saying to the leaders of the Jewish people in the sixth century before Christ, "You have forgotten your calling. You think it's all about you and getting your needs met and getting the best food and the best clothing. You forgot that you are meant to be servants of the servants of God."

We find the same thing happening in the day of Jesus. In Matthew 23 Jesus gives seven woes. He speaks about the religious leaders of his day when he says, "What sorrow awaits you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." He goes on to say this, "You love the choice seat at the banquet. You love to be greeted by name. You enjoy the stature that comes with being a religious leader, and yet you ask the people to do things that you yourself are unwilling to lift a finger to do. You are like whitewashed tombs. You look pious and holy on the outside but inside you are filled with filth and decay. What sorrow awaits you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Everything you do is for show!"

You might remember that the word hypocrite in Greek literally means, "an
actor on a stage." Jesus is calling the religious leaders of his day, at least many of them, people who are playacting when it comes to their faith. They are pretending in order to get something for their own gain and their own stature. There is a temptation to use God in this way and sometimes we end up doing it and we don’t even realize it. This is why Jesus calls our attention to it and he challenges us as he did the religious people of his day.

We think of extreme examples of this happening when we think of Catholic priests we have read about in scandals over the past decade who were abusing children. I think of Protestant pastors who have taken advantage of their role and entered into sexual relationships with women who are vulnerable and who came to them and were looking for a safe place but instead became a victim. These were shepherds who were supposed to be caring for people and end up hurting children and others in the church.

Sometimes it happens with youth leaders or Sunday school teachers or others who misuse their position and they become what Jesus described as, "wolves in sheep's clothing." They hurt people in the name of Jesus. This is one of the reasons why we make everybody here that works with children and youth go through a background check. This is why we continue to develop training for all who serve those who are vulnerable. This is why we try to make sure there are at least two adults in every setting where there are children and youth involved, because we want to make sure that the church is a safe place.

We know that when God's name is misused in this way it angers God as you see the response of Jesus when God’s children are being taken advantage of, like going into the temple with a whip and letting those who are taking advantage of the poor through money changing and selling animals for sacrifice. You had to change your money into temple currency to give an offering and the exchange rate was NOT good! You had to buy special, certified doves to sacrifice and the mark-up was enormous compared to what you could pay out at the Jerusalem Walmart.

This makes me think of some of the television evangelist in today’s world. I'm sure that some have good hearts but we also know there are some, at least in hindsight it seems clear, that were really focused on personal gain. I think of Robert Tilton back in the 1980s. I was in seminary when he began his ministry and he became very famous. He put together basically a one-hour infomercial in which he particularly appealed to the poor and those who were financially struggling. He invited them to send him a faith commitment of $1000 and then he
promised that he would pray for them and that God would bless them with jobs and reward them financially. They would be successful if they would pray and give him $1000.

He had different gimmicks he would use to get them to do this. He would invite them to trace their hands on a piece of paper and then when he got your letter he told them he would put his hand where you put your hand. He would then say, "If you will send in your thousand dollars then we will agree together and you will be blessed.” He would send out a prayer fabric that people could hold in their hand and told them that he was praying over that piece of fabric when it was returned to him with that $1000. He used a multitude of these kinds of gimmicks and brought in more than $80 million a year from people who were struggling.

It all came unraveled when ABC news reported that all of the envelopes with traced hands and prayer cloths were being sent directly to the bank. The bank would take the check out and everything else would be put in a dumpster or burned. Within a few years the entire ministry crumbled as people realized what he was doing in the name of God. I wonder what happened to him and so I did some research and found out that he was preaching again online. He no longer is on television, but he preaches out of a church in California. I was struck by the banner across his church’s web page which I thought I would share with you.

SLIDE How to Be Rich (Graphic)

"How to be Rich and have everything you ever wanted: Releasing God’s Miracle Supply into Your Life!" After all he went through this is still a big part of who he is and what he professes to preach. I look at this and it seems so counter to the gospel which Jesus preached. I have a hunch that the main person that will strike it rich is Robert Tilton himself as he invites people once more to send in their faith commitment of $1000 and offers to pray for their prosperity.

It’s easy to point out this in other people and look and see how horrible other people might be because they seem so obvious and blatant about misusing God’s name. But the main point in this sermon series is that we can't just isolate ourselves from people who we think are bad and say, "Well, look at them and see how evil they are." The reason we can't do that is because of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said that we have used throughout this sermon series which is that the, "line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."
So to be fair we need ask ourselves, "Are there ways that we have ever used God to gratify our own needs? Are there ways that we have missed represent God? Are there ways we have hurt people in God's name?"

These are challenging questions for me because I am someone who draws a paycheck from the church. I get paid to represent God. I have had this conversation with many preachers and I wrestle within myself with the reality that it is we preachers who probably most often violate the third commandment. We stand in front of people every week and basically say, "Thus saith the Lord." But the truth is that none of us have a direct line to God and knows exactly what God would say in any given situation. As I have been meeting with our interns and as I meet with younger pastors I always try to encourage them to remember that each time we step in the pulpit we do so with fear and trembling knowing that we are bound to violate the third commandment from time to time.

I have to constantly check my motives and ask, "Why am I doing this? Am I doing this for the right motives because I want to love God and love my neighbor?" The reason that we have to ask those questions is because we are all a mixed bag of motives. Every last one of us is a mixed bag of motives if we are honest. Sometimes those bad motives take over and we have to be cautious and always vigilant, looking inside of ourselves and trying to be honest with where our understanding of God and God’s word is coming from.

From time to time as a pastor I'll have people tell me that they know that this person or that person joined the church to help their business and to make business contacts. That doesn't surprise me because I have always tried to lead a church where people who aren't religious or who don't have a religious background feel comfortable. It is bound to happen that some people who we reach will join the church for the wrong reasons. Some people join the church because they think by doing so it will make life better and that somehow bad things will stop happening to them. I think we all probably know that this is not true. Yes, we might find a better perspective and we might begin to do something that will help our lives be richer and more meaningful, but it's not like joining the church makes things magically change.

My hope is that over time as people connect more deeply through worship and through a small group and through studying the Scriptures and through prayer and serving others that they might be able to say, "Hey, wait a minute. I got it all wrong. This isn't about increasing my business. This isn't about increasing my wealth. This is about loving God and loving people. It's not about me but it's
about serving and loving God and others, and I realize that in doing that I find meaning and purpose."

What I find interesting is that when we finally give ourselves up to Christ and we recognize that it is Christ working within us which changes us and the world, we actually tend to make better decisions in other parts of our lives. We begin to do things with more integrity which tends to cause people to say, "I really trust you." The reality of our faith is that it is meant to be a relationship and you know that it takes time to develop trust and to really see a relationship begin to take root and be a benefit in our lives.

If we are honest, we sometimes wear cross as jewelry because it's the right thing to wear at a particular time in a particular setting. We may not take the cross seriously, but maybe someday we will. We sometimes carry our Bible at just the right time and in just the right place so people will notice we have a Bible. How easy it is to use God for our own purposes. This is one of the challenges that we have as humans and each one of us struggles with this if we are honest.

A second way that we struggle with evil in the name of God is when we see violence done in holy wars. There is no shortage of examples in just about every religious movement and faith group in the world. Baruch Goldstein was an Israeli-American with citizenship in both countries. He was living in one of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. There are Palestinian territories in the West Bank and then there are Jewish settlements. The Palestinians believe these Jewish settlements are illegal and they are in the West Bank as well. This particular settlement is just outside of Hebron which is the place where Abraham and Sarah are buried. Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Leah are buried here as well because it's the Cave of the Patriarchs. It is a place of deep prayer and significant religious meaning for the Jewish people.

Since the 600s there has been a mosque built over the Cave of the Patriarchs. On February 25, 1994 Baruch Goldstein showed up at the hour of prayer dressed in his Israeli defense uniform. This day was the overlapping religious holidays of Purim and Ramadan. The attack left 29 male worshippers dead and 125 wounded. The attack only ended after Goldstein had expended his ammunition, when he was overcome and beaten to death by survivors. At least as disturbing as the event itself was the Jewish settlers who are extremists, who erected a memorial to him and considered him a saint and a holy man for having done this terrible thing.

Of course, none of us will ever forget what happened on September 11,
2001. The moment before the airplanes crashed into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center towers and a field in Pennsylvania, the last words shouted by the terrorists were, "God is great!"

Lest we think Christians are immune to this, we can't forget our own history. The pivotal example is the Crusades. In the early part of the 11th century the Caliph in the holy land destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is one of the holiest shrines of Christendom. It's the place that marks where Jesus was crucified and buried and then raised the dead. In response to that and a host of other socioeconomic and geopolitical factors, the Pope and the priests and the Prince's in Europe rallied the people to a Crusade. It took seventy years from the time the church was destroyed until the Crusades showed up in the holy land. When they showed up that Caliph had been dead for a long time and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher had since been rebuilt. Christians were allowed to worship there again but that didn't matter to those who were on the holy crusade in the name of God, the Lord of all the earth.

The name of God, the infidels were going to be pushed out of the Holy Land. You've undoubtedly heard about the eyewitness accounts of those who were present, including one man who wrote these words, "Some of our men who were more merciful, cut off the heads of their enemies in the name of Christ. Others shot them with arrows so that they fell from the towers. Others tortured them longer by casting them into flames and watching them burn. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon (which at this time had the Muslim Shrine, Dome of the Rock built on top of it. This was a place where religious services are ordinarily chanted.) Men rode in blood up to their knees. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers when it had suffered so long from their blasphemies. How the men rejoiced and exalted and sang God's praises."

The account is actually much more graphic than those words but I took out portions of it which I thought were too graphic to read even here in church. They rejoiced and rejoiced in the name of God at the death of their enemies, and many of them had done nothing but come to worship in a holy place.

Each time that someone commits violence or wages war in the name of God, they usually manage to justify it in some way using the Scriptures. Mohammed was a warrior and unified the Arabian Peninsula, so this shows up in the Koran and there are passages which can be used to justify violence in the name of Islam. Most Muslims reject that but some who are extremists find these
passages pivotal and lead them to do horrifying things in the name of God.

In Judaism the Hebrew Bible has stories of 33 different cities or small kingdoms which were completely annihilated at the word of God to Joshua and Moses. Every man, woman and child were killed and these passages are used to justify violence done even today by Jewish extremists. Though most Jews would say that is horrible and we don't believe in that and we want to live in a different way, there are some who do.

For Christians, it's a bit more complicated, because we wonder how it is that we could slaughter our enemies when Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." No matter what your enemy has done to you, how can you blatantly kill them knowing that this passage and others like it were uttered by the one that we call Savior and Lord?

This may be why Shakespeare penned these words in the Merchant of Venice:

SLIDE (Shakespeare graphic on left) “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a smiling cheek, a goodly apple rotten at the heart. O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!”

The truth is that religion doesn't cause war, people cause war. Religion is actually meant to be a force which is meant to pull people back from the edge of war and find different ways to resolve conflict. The truth is that in the last century several people have tried organizing their cultures and their society without religion. The Soviet Union was officially atheist as well as Communist China. Vietnam and Cambodia profess to be atheist regimes. We have tried that experiment and we saw tens of millions of people who were killed and slaughtered, not in the name of God but by a dictator. This teaches us that if it is not in the name of God then it will be in the name of a political party. If it's not in the name of the political party then it will be in the name of an economic system. If it's not in the name of economic system then it will be in the name of something else or someone else. Human beings have a bent towards violence which we see all the way through the Scriptures.

Our faith is meant to give us boundaries and restrain us from these moments. Our faith in Jesus Christ is meant to hold us back and give us perspective and make us look inside at our heart and why it is we find ourselves wanting to do these things. We are meant to be able to say, "I will not kill in the
name of God. This will not be how I live my life. Jesus has taught me that he is the way and the truth and the life."

Charles Kimball is a professor at the University of Oklahoma and he also is a Baptist minister. He wrote an excellent book called, "When Religion Becomes Evil." In his book he mentions five warning signs for when religion is about to do something horrible. Whether it is a cult group or a mainline religious tradition, when it begins to head in the direction of doing evil things you will see signs. Not everyone who participates in each of these things are necessarily evil but these are the steppingstones towards an institution or group of people doing evil. It builds to a climax of a holy war or acts of holy violence.

SLIDE (Graphic of book on left)

Rigidly making absolute truth claims.

SLIDE Blind obedience to a leader.

SLIDE Believing in an ideal time when that particular religion is going to rule.

SLIDE The end justifies any means.

SLIDE Finally a declaration of a holy war.

The problem isn't having absolute truth claims. Every religion and even atheists have absolute truth claims. We have beliefs which we believe tell us how the world really is and the nature of ultimate reality and that's okay. I believe in God and that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus, by his words, by his witness, by his life, by his death and resurrection showed us the way and the truth and the life. He revealed to us who God is and who we are meant to be as we follow God. We find our most authentic selves in Jesus Christ and I believe that. I'm willing to die for that. I will not kill for it, but I am willing to die for it.

Those absolute truth claims are tempered by the fact that I know that I can't prove that to anybody. I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm 99% sure that what I believe is true. How do I know it's true? Why am I 99% sure that it's true? I read the witness of the apostles and I believe them. I have listened to other people who have had the experience of Christ and I believe them and their experience. I think it makes sense rationally and logically and philosophically, and in my own life I have experienced the presence of Christ. All of those things would say to me that the things I believe are true, but I can't prove them to you with 100% certainty.
I have made friends over the last 10 years of a Jewish Rabbi and he told me once that the people in his synagogue and his friends who were Jewish thought I was only being his friend because I want to convert him. I told him that I was his friend because I like him and I think I'm a better Christian when I hang around with him. The truth is that he knows the New Testament better than most Christians I know. I hope he's a better Jew because he hangs out with me.

I also have to be honest with him and tell him that I do believe that Jesus is my Messiah, and that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. If I didn't believe that then I wouldn't be a Christian. Because I believe that he is the Messiah for my Jewish friend, the one that he is praying and waiting for, of course I want him to know Jesus Christ as his Messiah.

I know that my friend believes that Jesus was a prophet and that he respects me and appreciates me and my faith and my friendship. While I'm 99% sure, I'm willing to concede to my friend with that 1% that he might be right as well. What I hope for him is that he would also believe that he's 99% right and leave a 1% opening for me and for the Christian faith. Somehow, that willingness to admit that, I think, allows us to be friends with people of other faith traditions without having a hidden agenda of trying to convert them at every turn. My hope is that we would learn from each other and grow because we know each other and that we might encourage each other.

The problem with absolute truth claims is when we become rigid. The problem is not having foundational truths that you're willing to build your life upon because we all need that. The problem is what we pile on top of it like all of the doctrines that we think are important and suddenly we hold those rigidly. We start saying things like, "Only if you baptize in the same way that I baptize are you a real Christian. But if you haven't been baptized in that way then you are not really a Christian." Sometimes we will say, "Only if you view the Bible in this way and if you interpreted the Scriptures in this manner are you a real Christian. But you are not a real Christian if you don't look at the Bible the way I look at the Bible."

The rigidity of those kinds of doctrine leads us into a black-and-white kind of faith which says that you're either in or you're out, you're right or you're wrong, you're a heretic or you’re a Christian. You are with us or you're against us. That kind of polarization, which is what we often find in our society at large when it comes to politics and almost every other part of life, is what leads to a very unhealthy place where eventually people are willing to kill other people because
they are not on their side. We end up demonizing and dehumanizing other people. It doesn't take long for us to get to a place where we are willing to kill them.

Kimball mentions in his book the charismatic leader that people are willing to follow and how that usually is a part of the equation. Every church or religious community seems to have a leader or multiple religious leaders of whom people say, "I really respect that person. I appreciate what they have to say. I'm inspired when they talk." That's how it works and that's okay. But beware of a leader who tells you, "You have to believe what I believe or else you are wrong. You are not allowed to question me."

When I was a student at the University of Colorado we had a man named Jim McCarthy who was on staff at the University come to speak to our Wesley Foundation, the United Methodist student ministry at CU. His only job was to keep track of the more than 200 cults and religious groups in the Boulder area and report to the University which ones were safe for students to be a part of and which were seen as dangerous.

Jim told stories about students arriving on campus, many of them from fundamentalist Christian communities, who had never been encouraged to think for themselves. He talked about how easy it was for these students to get wrapped up in bizarre religious groups that told them what to think. He told us very clearly that if we ever got into a group where they didn't allow us to ask questions, or to question the leadership, that we should run away as fast as possible in a different direction because it probably wasn't safe.

When you come to this church we tell you all the time that you are meant to ask questions. We don't want you to check your brain at the door of the church. It's okay to disagree with the pastor. It's okay to disagree with each other. I'm not always right and I want you to ask questions about the things that I say. Partly I want you to do that because that is how you claim faith for yourself. It can't be your faith if you don't ask questions about it. I don't want you to have my faith. I want you to have your own that will stand during the storms of life. Don't blindly follow somebody, no matter who they are. We are always meant to engage our intellect which is why Jesus told us to love God with our mind as well as with our hearts.

I think Pascal was right when he said:
SLIDE (Graphic) Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

We are called to be aware of that danger and that tendency. I am going to be somebody who is going to say clearly that I am not going to hate in the name of Jesus. I'm not going to kill in the name of Christ. While I have passionate convictions for which I am willing to die and sacrifice for, I also hold those loosely and recognize someone else might have something to teach me and I might learn from that person even though we disagree.

This leads to the more common challenge for most of us when it comes to doing evil in the name of God. My friend who is a Baptist pastor told me this story about how a Baptist pastor was walking along the road when he came to a bridge. There on the bridge was a man who was standing right on the edge and he was ready to jump off. The pastor stopped and said, "Wait! Don't do that! Why are you going to do this?"

The man on the bridge said, "Because nobody loves me. I feel so unloved and alone."

The pastor said, "Wait a minute. God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

The man said, "Yes, I believe in God."

The pastor said, "Well, me too! Are you a Christian or some other faith tradition?"

The man said, "I'm a Christian."

The pastor said, "Me too! Are you Protestant or Catholic?"

The man replied, "I'm a Protestant."

"Me too," exclaimed the pastor. "What denomination are you?"

"I'm a Baptist," replied the man. "Me too!" said the pastor. "Are you Southern Baptist or are you Northern Baptist?"

"I’m Northern Baptist." The pastor exclaimed, "me too! Are you Northern Baptist Great Lakes region or are you Northern Baptist Eastern region."

"I'm in the Great Lakes region."

"That's awesome because I am too! Are you Northern Baptist Great Lakes region conservative or liberal?"

"I'm Northern Baptist Great Lakes region conservative."
"Meet too! Are you Northern Baptist Great Lakes region conservative of 1879 or 1912?"

The man said, "1912."

The pastor pushed the man off the bridge and said, "Die heretic!"

It's funny but sadly true how we Christians do this kind of thing. The night before Jesus is crucified he prays in John chapter 17 this high priestly prayer, "O Father, help these disciples of mine have unity. Help them to be one as we are one."

Why did Jesus have to pray that the week before he is crucified? He knows that we Christians are going to have this very human tendency to divide and splinter over the tiniest of things. He knows his disciples are going to struggle. If you read the New Testament carefully you will find in the early church that there is evidence of division. Almost every letter in the New Testament is written to a church that is struggling with who is in and who is out and how to do faith when you disagree. There is divisiveness and childish bickering. Within the Christian community we are people who share the love of Jesus Christ and yet we still demonize each other at times. In the early church they pushed each other away in their divisions in the church. We find this still today, don't we?

In the official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestants are seen today as being followers of Jesus but we are lesser followers. We are lesser brothers and sisters and part of the reason for that is because if the Roman Catholic Church said that we were equal then people in our church might decide to go to your church. We try to keep people in by building fences and walls. My father's side of the family was Roman Catholic and so I have been to Catholic mass. I have met priests who are very open and welcoming and some who are not so much. All I can think of to say is, "Seriously? You really think that we are not followers of Jesus Christ because we are not in your church?"

Jesus said, "Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of people. Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as you love yourself." I wake up every morning and I give my life to Christ and I seek to follow with everything that I am and everything that I have. I know I'm not perfect but I'm at least on the journey, and I'm not really part of the “in” crowd? I'm doing my best to follow and to give what little I have for him but I am a lesser brother or sister because I don't believe that the bread and the cup actually become the body and blood of Jesus, but instead it only represents the body the blood of Jesus Christ? I don't believe
exactly what the Roman Catholic Church believes about Mary but I still exalt her as the greatest of all women and so I am lesser than you?

I don't want to just pick on the Catholics because there are groups of Protestants that say Catholics are not really Christians. If they are not Christians then what in the heck are they? Last time I checked they believe in the triune God. They confess the same faith that we confess. They believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human and that he died on the cross for the sins of the world. They turn to him as their Lord and as their Savior. They offer their lives to him and they pray sometimes more than we pray. They worship sometimes more than we worship. And they're not really Christians?

This is what we do to each other. The Protestant traditions are splintered into 1000 different denominations. Why do we do this? I think what happens is a very human struggle that we have. If you disagree with me I might be threatened by that. I'm threatened by that because when you disagree with me what I hear is that I am wrong and I don't like to be wrong. So now I have to decide how I respond. I have to either admit that I might be wrong, or at least I will be gracious to you because you're wrong, or I decide I can't hang around with you because I feel threatened by the fact that you think I'm wrong. It's not enough just to not hang out with you but I have to also call you names to make it clear that we are different. I need to bring you down so that I can be sure that I am lifted up and make myself feel better. I feel it too sometimes.

Somewhere in there I have to remember what it really means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. How do I demonstrate love when I believe differently from someone else? Is it okay to disagree? Is it possible the other person is right or that I at least might learn something from them and their beliefs?

I think about the way that Christian churches divide and separate themselves and what has happened over the last 30 to 40 years. A number of evangelical churches have separated themselves off from a denomination or a body of believers because there is a litmus test and you have to say certain words to be “in.” If you won't say those words then you're “out.” The litmus test for evangelical and conservative churches the last 30 or 40 years has had to do with the words we use about the Bible. It wasn't enough to say that you believe God inspired the Bible. It wasn't enough that you actually read it every day and you try to live it. You also had to say that it was, "inerrant and infallible." These were the two buzz words and if you could use those two words then you were “in” but if you didn't use those two words then you are “out.”
Today the issue is homosexuality. This is what dividing the church in many ways. The mainline churches are all struggling with this right now and the evangelical and conservative churches will be dealing with it sooner or later because it is also a generational issue. In general, the younger generations, even in those conservative churches, see this issue differently than their parents. We have this divide that has happened and we even feel it here at First United Methodist Church because our denomination is wrestling with this right now. We have seen the Episcopalians and Presbyterians and the Lutherans and every major denomination struggling with these kinds of issues.

When I was an intern at the Iowa state University Wesley Foundation and Collegiate United Methodist Church I went with a group of students to our nation's capital in Washington DC to look at the issue of urban homelessness and hunger in America. My favorite place to visit was the Lincoln Memorial and it was especially striking to be there at night.

**SLIDE Lincoln Memorial (graphic)**

I see it as this great edifice which stands for something really important: equality for all people, justice for everyone, freedom from slavery. This memorial reminds me of who we are and what it means to be Americans that are best. It's patterned after Greek temple and when you go inside you see that deified version of Abraham Lincoln.

**SLIDE Statue of Lincoln (graphic)**

We don't believe that Lincoln was a God but he does seem larger-than-life in terms of what he stands for and what he literally gave his life for. When you turn to the right of this statue you see Lincoln's second inaugural address on the wall. It's 1865 and the fighting has gone on for four years. Here is what he says in the middle of that inaugural address. He says this of the people in the South and in the North.

**(Graphic of Lincoln Statue for quote on the left)**

*Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.*

The people in the South were absolutely certain they were fighting for a biblical principle. References to slavery are found well over 100 times in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Not a single verse in the Bible called upon the people of Israel or the followers of Jesus to abolish slavery. Not
even one can be found. The weight of Scripture in terms of the sheer number of verses is that slavery was a practice acceptable to God and was the natural order of things. It was argued clearly from pulpits in churches in both the North and the South that slavery was God's will and God's plan and God's order of things.

The abolitionists in the North and the South were also Christians and they were reading from that same Bible. Some of them took every one of those verses on slavery and showed how those were really contextual and they were part of the culture and the practice was different 2000 years ago. They argued that we can't look at that and justify what we are doing today. Those were passages related to the culture and should be taken in that context. There were other abolitionists who said that there were other verses that were more important than those on slavery. They pointed to the fact that the Scriptures tell us that everyone is created in God's image. They said we were to love justice and kindness and walk humbly with God. They quoted the Scriptures where it tells us the Messiah came to loosen the shackles from slaves and set the prisoner free. The Scriptures tell us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and to love God and to love our neighbor are the two most important Commandments. They argued that regardless of what the Bible said about slavery, this greater principle trumped any of those passages so all people must be free.

They read from the same Bible and they prayed to the same God. They invoked God's name on both sides and claimed to have his truth. What I find interesting is that we do that with most things, whether it's the authority of Scripture or homosexuality or any other challenging topic that we struggle with as humans. One side turns to five specific passages about homosexuality and another side turns to other passages that look at bigger themes in the Bible. Both are followers of Jesus Christ and both are claiming in aiming to do God's will, praying to the same God and reading the same Bible.

What I find interesting is that my thinking on these topics and many others has changed over the course of my life. When I first began reading the Bible in earnest when I was in high school I thought it was all just a fairytale and nice stories. I had a good friend who had read the entire Bible through three times by the time he was 15 and he was convinced that he knew the Bible and he knew the truth and his church was the only church which really understood Jesus the correct way. I would giggle and make fun of him and quite honestly probably took the Lord's name in vain in doing so. My friend was pretty sure that most of us Methodist were not really Christians but he was hoping to convert me someday!
Do I dare to tell you that he is now a Methodist today!

What's interesting is that as I have continued to read the Bible over the course of my life I have discovered its complexity and its power. I have gotten to know people of authentic faith who are different than me. As I listen to the reasons why they hold fast to what they believe I realize that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was when I was 15. What I have discovered is that over time, I have become less certain but I have deeper faith. Spiritual maturity doesn't mean that we know more stuff. The more that we grow spiritually the more than we realize that we don't know and the more we realize we need God's grace more than ever. That is meant to breed in me humility when I look at faith.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, once said this.

SLIDE  (graphic of Wesley on left)

"When I was young, I was sure of everything. In a few years, having been mistaken 1000 times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before. At present, I'm hardly sure of anything, but what God reveals to me each day."

What I have come to realize is that if I think the 3 pounds of gray matter on the top of my head is able to fully comprehend and interpret in every way the Scriptures, and I fully understand God, then my God is too small. Somewhere that should lead me to humility in conversations with others in a chance to say what Wesley said in a sermon.

SLIDE  (graphic of Wesley on left)

"If your heart is with my heart, we can disagree on 1000 things, but give me your hand."

SLIDE  (graphic of Wesley on left)

"In essentials unity—in non-essentials liberty—and in all things charity."

That is our spirit here in this church, which leads me one last comment about the ways that we get it wrong. When it comes to how we act as Christians, it’s the little things that we say and do which reinforces other people’s reasons for not being a part of the church or followers of Jesus Christ. As one young man told me this last week, "Christians are jerks."

The truth is that most Christians are not jerks, although humbly all of us are
sometimes jerks because we are human. Sometimes we do and say things which contradict the very things we seek to represent. Maybe you heard about the pastor and a group from his church who went to eat at Applebee's last year. There were more than six of them and so at 18% gratuity was added to the bill but the pastor scratched off the 18% and wrote, "Why should you get 18% when God only gets 10%?" Another waitress took a picture of that receipt and posted it online. She was fired for that because you're not supposed to release this kind of information. The picture of that receipt shot across America like wildfire with tens of millions of people saying, "That's why don't like Christians. They are all like that."

So if you're going to lunch today maybe you could give a little bit extra tip just even things out a bit. Here's the problem, even though most Christians are not jerks most of the time, all it takes is one person and one action for whole lot of people to say, "That's what they're all like and that's why I don't need it in my life." Most the time it takes 20 or more Christians living a life of love and a good example to overcome one bad example. What I hope and pray for you here as the presence of Jesus Christ in the world from First United Methodist Church is that we might be the people who are constantly trying to be the example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This is why the apostle Paul gives us these words in our passage of Scripture for today.

SLIDE 29 Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. 32 Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

Jesus said, "The world will know that you're my followers by the way that you love one another." The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians who are constantly fighting with each other, says this is what love looks like. Let's read these words together from 1 Corinthians 13.

SLIDE 4 Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud 5 or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. 6 It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. 7 Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through


every circumstance...

13 Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

I wanted to give you a picture of what it looks like for good to overcome evil when it is done in the name of God. This news made it all the way over to England and was first posted on a UK newspaper. Joseph Myles was nine years old and riding with his mom in the car and he drove past Washburn University and there were the Westborough Baptist church people with their picket signs about who God hates. Joseph asked his mom, "Can I make a sign and stand out there too?"

His mom asked, "Well, what you want to say and put on your sign?"

He told her and so she handed him a note pad and a pen and he scratched out his sign. He opened the door and then stood outside of the car holding up a sign. Someone took a picture of him as he protested alongside them.

SLIDE (Graphic) Joseph Miles

SLIDE (Graphic) Joseph Miles close up on words

"God hates no one." In this particular case, that nine-year-old holding a sign, one person willing to stand up and offer a voice of love in the face of hatred, made it around the world many times over. There are more than 500 here this week in worship and my hope is that each one of us would have the courage and boldness to become champions of love and kindness in our world, showing what the real Jesus actually looks like.

The truth is that all of us have been imposters at some point along the way. We have all done and said things in the name of God that would probably wish we could take back, but from this point forward I hope and pray together that we will be the real deal—real followers of Christ—that we might show a world that is skeptical of Christians what his love actually looks like. Would you bow in prayer with me? A

SLIDE Prayer

Even in the last week you may have been short with somebody or said something that was hurtful. Maybe you have done something that was thoughtful or truly thought less. I would invite you to simply pray... God please forgive me. Forgive me for hurting someone else. Forgive me for saying what I should have said or doing what I should've done. Just ask for God’s grace and mercy in the
silence...

Then you might simply say: God I offer my life to you that you might use me to be a voice of love, to be a champion of your peace, that my words would give grace to those who hear...

Forgive us we pray oh God and help us by the power of your Holy Spirit to be authentically the presence of your son Jesus Christ in the world. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

“Evil in the Name of God”

Theme: The Line Between Good and Evil

Scripture: Exodus 20:7; Ephesians 4:29-32

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Meditation Moments for Monday, February 3 – Read Exodus 20:7, 34:5-10 – In Bible times, a “name” conveyed a person’s inner essence. The third commandment dealt with much more than the “cussing,” though casual use of God’s name as a swear word is surely not what God hopes for in our lives. God revealed his “name,” his character, to Israel through Moses. They didn’t always live up to it, but they passed on the command that they not use God’s “name” to support negative or destructive actions or thoughts.

- The nations around Israel usually thought their “gods” sought sacrifices as a kind of bribe to get the god to send rain or protect one from harm. God told Moses, “I make a covenant” (a promise like he gave Abraham—cf. Genesis 15:18). In what ways have you experienced God’s covenant—God sticking with you through both good and bad? How have the human “trust” relationships you’ve lived with shaped, positively or negatively, your ability to trust that God’s love for you is truly steadfast?

- In recent years, we’ve seen tragic efforts to hide unethical and even criminal conduct in order to “protect” churches or schools that claim a connection with God. In what ways is any person or institution that attaches a word like “Christian” to itself using God’s “name”? What explicit or implicit claims go with a use of God’s name? In what ways do cover-ups of failures harm rather than protect or honor God’s name?

Prayer: Lord, remind me every day that “Christian” is not just a label on a census form, but a commitment I’ve made to represent and honor you. Grow in me the qualities that characterize your “name.” Amen.

Tuesday, February 4 – Read Isaiah 55:1-9, Isaiah 19:19-25 – God called the prophet Isaiah, like most of Israel’s prophets, to share a message with God’s people that was challenging—often downright unpopular—yet filled with hope. Isaiah’s vision said God’s mercy was wider than we’d expect—wide enough to even reach out to include Assyria and Egypt, Israel’s enemies and oppressors.

- In Isaiah 55:7 Isaiah said, "Let the wicked abandon their ways ... so that [God] may have mercy on them." The thought of God offering his mercy to the wicked is challenging, especially if we think we don’t belong in that category. But
everyone makes mistakes in life, and misses the path at times. How does God’s great mercy affect the way you view yourself, despite the mistakes you have made in the past?

- Isaiah 19:23-25 casts a vision of bitter enemies uniting to worship God together. This is a hope-filled picture of what the world will be like when God rids the world of hate, pain and suffering once and for all. In your life right now, how could you go about building “a highway from Egypt to Assyria”? In what strained or broken relationships can you effectively build “roads” along which God’s grace can work?

**Prayer:** Lord God, thank you that your mercy is far wider than I could expect, even when that pushes me out of my comfort zone. Help me to see myself and others in light of your great mercy. Amen.

**Wednesday, February 5** – Read 2 Kings 5:1-14 – A Syrian general named Naaman had leprosy. An Israelite girl captured in a cross-border raid said she knew of a prophet who could heal him. The king in Samaria thought the Syrians were trying to start a war. Naaman was at first too proud to wash in the Jordan River as the prophet Elisha said. Many of the religious and national attitudes that keep the Middle East in conflict today were at work. Yet God’s love and mercy overcame the obstacles, and the foreign general found healing.

- Trace the many points in this story at which fear of, or arrogance toward, someone from a different country or faith could have derailed God’s healing purpose. Who do you deal with often who triggers some of those feelings in you because they are different? Ask God to help you find common ground, and watch for ways to bless that person.

- The unnamed Israelite girl is a remarkable example of what God can do in our hearts. Dragged from her home by raiding soldiers, she still wished good for Naaman and pointed him to the source of help. When has someone wished good for you and pointed you to a source of help? When have you been able to do that for someone else?

**Prayer:** Loving God, I want to become more and more like the nameless girl in this story. Help me to desire your good for all the people I deal with, and to learn from stories like these how to point them to you. Amen.

**Thursday, February 6** – Read Exodus 21:15-25 and Matthew 5:21-26, 38-45 – In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly used the formula, “It was said … but I say to you …” The law in Exodus 21 (cf. also Leviticus 24, Deuteronomy 19) limited revenge to “an eye for an eye.” In a world in which revenge was often viciously excessive (“you hurt me, I’ll kill your whole family”), Israel’s law of proportional revenge was more merciful than most. But Jesus taught an even more radical approach: “Love your enemies.”

- We think of ourselves as more sophisticated than the ancient world. Yet we talk about “settling a score” or “getting revenge” in everything from sports rivalries to multi-million dollar business deals. How does it reshape our interactions to replace an ideal of revenge with an ideal of mutual love and service? In what ways does Jesus’ teaching speak to your heart about the ways in which you deal with others?

- The *Translator’s Handbook on Matthew* said, “The term [for love in ‘Love your enemies’] from the Old Testament always implies a sense of faithful loyalty, not mere emotion, so that expressions which approach this idea are to be preferred over those meaning merely to like someone very much.” What does it look like in your life to “love” people you do not “like very much,” even people who have wronged you? How can Jesus’ life and death help you re-define “love” in terms of actions rather than feelings?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me with the kind of rock-hard, determined love that could face the cross to give me the chance to choose eternal life. Teach me how to love in a way that reaches beyond good feelings. Amen.

**Friday, February 7** – Read Ephesians 2:11-19 – The apostle Paul knew about religious prejudice and hatred—he’d lived it (cf. Galatians 1:13-14). In these verses, he was probably picturing the wall in the Jerusalem Temple’s courtyard that bore signs warning in Hebrew, Greek and Latin that any Gentile who went beyond that wall was subject to death. He also knew from his own life that Jesus’ power tore down the dividing wall between people, and broke through barriers of race, prejudice and fear.

- In their book *UnChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons wrote; “nearly nine out of ten young outsiders (87 percent) said that the term judgmental accurately describes present-day Christianity.” When you meet difference in someone else, are you more inclined to build walls, or to tear down walls and seek understanding? How does Christ’s acceptance of you inspire you to be part of the “one new humanity” Jesus came to create?

- Paul’s ministry focused particularly on bridging the divide between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Galatians 2:6-9). What are some of the major factors (e.g. education, economic or social status, political beliefs, denominational connections) that divide people from one another in your world? How can you use your influence to carry on Christ’s work to “create one new person out of the two groups, making peace”?

**Prayer:** Loving Lord, history tells me that often we misrepresent your name because people who are different from us scare
us. Help me more and more to learn to see all people the way you see them. Amen.

Saturday, February 8 — Read John 8:1-11 — John said the religious leaders, stones in hand, were using this woman to trap Jesus (verse 6). That probably explains why the woman’s partner (she couldn’t commit adultery alone!) wasn’t there—the leaders may well have set her up. They saw themselves as righteous, as upholding God’s law (verse 5). Jesus reframed the issue, saying, “Whoever hasn’t sinned should throw the first stone” (verse 7). After the “righteous” people slunk away in the face of this challenge, Jesus told the woman whose life he’d saved, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don’t sin anymore.”

• Around 1400, William Langland wrote, “All the wickedness in the world that man might work or think is no more to the mercy of God than a live coal in the sea.” In what ways does guilt or shame haunt your life? Imagine yourself huddled on the ground as the woman in this story was. Then hear Jesus say to you, “I don’t condemn you.” How can those words open your life to greater freedom, peace and joy? How can you extend that life-giving message to other struggling people whose path you cross?

Prayer: O God, you are the source of life and light, not condemnation or pain. Guide me that I may avoid the terrible evil of a condemning, self-righteous spirit, and pass on your life, hope and light to others. Amen.

Family Activity: Sometimes people behave or speak in terrible, harmful ways in the name of God. John Wesley’s rule states, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.” Talk about each of these phrases as a family. What does the word “all” mean and are there any exceptions? Compare Wesley’s rule to Jesus’ greatest commandments found in Matthew 22:37-40. Identify ways your family can grow to follow the rules of Jesus and John Wesley more completely. Share and celebrate your stories at the dinner table or at bedtime. Pray and ask God to help you love others as God loves you.