

# All Who Love and Serve Your City

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
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**Luke 13:31-35**

This week one of the presidential candidates made a speech regarding urban policy, focusing on race and poverty. I won't name the candidate as I don't want to appear to be endorsing her or him. But I do want to endorse the concept of a speech on urban policy, and in particular of connecting the cities where we live with the most pressing conversations on poverty and race. Things we care about, have cared about as a congregation, things like public education and gun violence, all flow from conversations on poverty and race. Those conversations do not happen exclusively in urban settings – like ours – but that happen in particular ways here, in intense ways here.

I grew up in small town and suburban Ohio, and really did not have much city experience when I went to seminary. But when I landed in Chicago, I felt a keen pull to urban ministry, which has been renewed time and time again, and was renewed when I arrived here. Perhaps that is what brings you to Third Church. When we look at the zip code distribution of our membership, roughly half comes from city zip codes and roughly half from suburban ones. What unites us is that we end up here, in this place, this place that calls us and draws us in, and then sends us out to many places in our communities, in the city, to work, to serve, to play.

As much as I believe that the walls of the church are permeable, that there is no inside the church or outside the church, but the church called to be many places, so I believe that about our geography, and I believe you do as well. Our worship and music, our education, especially our service, does not build artificial boundaries, but rather aspires to break down walls, break down barriers.

Perhaps you remember the Catholic priest and mystic Thomas Merton and his revelation. “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.”

What brings us here and sends us out is that we love all those people, all these people, even total strangers. We can put a fine point on it, a programmatic point. We love all those people, even the strangers, who come for food on Mondays or Thursdays or Saturdays, who come for shelter once a quarter, who come for learning support at Schools 3 or 35 or East High School, who live in a Habitat

house we build, or a house in New Orleans that we rehab, or a school in Kenya we support. We love all those people, whether we ever meet them or not.

That's a fine point. Here's a broader point. We love all those people, we are connected to and *with* all those people, whether we meet them or not, those in the houses we drive by and those in the houses we would never dream of driving by. Those in line with us at Wegman's and those who shop at stores we've not heard of or couldn't find. Those who go to other churches and those who go to no church. Those who look like us and talk like us and believe like us and spend like us and those who are nothing like us...except that we are connected to them.

It is not just Thomas Merton's revelation. It is our revelation, and there are items when we need to be moved just a little bit off center, out of our comfort zone, to help us remember, to reclaim that revelation, that vision, of our connectedness to one another, to every person around us, to every person, strangers and aliens, and in particular those in our city whose paths we might never cross but whose welfare is interrelated with ours. That's what draws us here and that's what sends us out to work and serve and play, whether we are always mindful of it or not.

I believe it is no accident that this Lenten journey we share with Jesus ends up in a city, the city of Jerusalem, the center of power, of politics and economics and religion and culture. No accident. Every place matters, or course. We are connected to every person in every place. There are real needs in rural and suburban communities, connections to be made. Yet Jesus comes to the city to minister and to die and we follow him here and we join him here.

Jesus is teaching to growing crowds, and so his threat to the political and religious status quo is growing. Some religious leaders, if not allies then at least sympathizers, approach him to warn him. "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." His life is in jeopardy for what he is doing, for the threat he presents, for the fact that he is breaking down barriers rather than building walls to separate people. He says, however, that his work must continue, in the face of threats. He knows what is coming. He is headed to Jerusalem, to the city, where the threat is the greatest and where the needs are the deepest.

Then he laments. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Jesus laments over the city, because the need is so great and yet they reject the healing and the hope and the transformation he has to offer. And yet it is to the city that he directs his ministry, and he knows and we know what he will face.

Mark Davis writes that "While Jesus embraces Jerusalem as the place of his forthcoming death, he does not accept Herod's threat as a reason to avoid the city... Jesus' words about Jerusalem are more than just an accusation of Jerusalem as the location of rejecting prophets. He longs to gather Jerusalem's inhabitants, as a hen offers herself as a shield when gathering her brood under her wings."

That is to say, despite the looming threats of the city, Jesus cares for it and has compassion over it, the implication being we should do the same if we are to follow him and be his disciples.

In preparation for this morning I dusted off some urban ministry volumes from my bookshelves; the language is not always 2016 language, but the points resonate. In a statement from 1981, the Presbyterian Church said that “As Presbyterians we confess that while we have enjoyed the advantages offered by cities, too often we have isolated ourselves from their problems and the opportunities for ministry which urban areas provide. We realize that to effectively ministry in urban America we must all acknowledge that our area of responsibility is no longer a series of relatively independent suburbs, towns, villages, and rural communities, but is now the whole metropolis.”

Interconnectedness. We love all these people, including the stranger and alien to us. We lament over the city, with Jesus.

In 1958, we Presbyterians urged that “each church accept the responsibility to minister to its immediate total community, that each church be inclusive in its service and membership, seeking fellowship and full communion with all, without distinction of race, color, or worldly condition.”

From John Calvin’s ministry in Geneva, a political and economic hub and a city of immigrants and refugees, to Rochester in 2016, our call has been to resist isolation and to embrace community, to make our church walls permeable and our vision compassionate, to transform community, not reject it, not condemn it, nor isolate ourselves from it.

That will look like many things. In a Black History Month setting, in this congregational setting, it means we look in special ways and in hard ways at race and racism and white privilege. We do that here and there but our work must persist. We have received a grant and are beginning to plan ways for conversations with our staff, with our youth, with all of us.

And it means that we look in special ways at poverty in our community, among the most concentrated and crushing in the nation. How do we understand it and what can we do to address it?

Race and poverty lead to other things, of course. This is not about program today. Rather, it is about accepting Jesus’ Lenten invitation to lament, with him, over the city, to move into its heart in order to transform it, to redeem it and heal it. In his great poem “Choruses from the Rock,” T.S. Eliot wrote:

“When the Stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?  
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?”  
What will you answer? “We all dwell together  
To make money from each other”? or “This is a community”?  
Oh my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger.  
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.”

Our answer must be the first one – we huddle close together because we love each other, even those we don’t know, even those we wouldn’t like, even those so vastly different for us we hardly know where to begin. We huddle close together because we love each other, and because Jesus, who loves us, went to the city to die, even for us. Amen.