



LESSONS IN LIVING

“A Different Way”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely
July 19, 2026

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20:20-28 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Then the mother of Zebedee's children brought James and John to Jesus, and knelt down beg to a favor of him. "What do you want?" Jesus asked. She answered, "Promise me that in your kingdom these children of mine will sit, one at your right hand and the other at your left." Jesus replied, "Do you know what you are asking? Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" "We can," they said. "Very well," said Jesus, "you will drink my cup. But as for seats at my right hand and my left, these are not mine to give. They belong to those for whom they've been prepared by God." The other ten, on hearing this, were indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus said to them, "You know how the leaders of the Gentiles push their people around. This is not to happen among you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest. And anyone among you who wishes to be first must serve the needs of all, as if enslaved—just as the Chosen One came not to be served but to serve, and to die in ransom for many."

Sermon

I love that this scripture story starts with a parent asking for a favor for their kid. Don't we know parents like that? The parents that lean on the coach to get their kid the best position on the team, that parent reaching for that proverbial biggest slice of cake for their kids, the kind of parent that makes our eyes roll. (*Laughter*)

So, here's this mom, the mother of James and John, going up to Jesus saying, *"Listen, I know, I can see that you're gonna be powerful, you're gonna sit on this throne, and I'm just asking as a humble mother this favor for my children. Just seat one on your left hand, one on your right hand, when you come into your power."* And then, you know, the disciples get incensed and Jesus says, *"No, no, no. No."*

But I can relate to this mom, as a parent. First of all, you don't want any harm to come to your children. You want good things for them. You want good opportunities. And maybe we wouldn't go as far to pull strings for our kids or pay for them to get into the best colleges. But we want what's good for our children.

Last month, the State Board of Education voted to approve changes to our social studies curricula in our public schools. Those include required readings from the Bible. The lessons that

were existing are reframed, lessons on cultural and racial diversity are minimized in that curriculum. And I read that it begins rolling out in 2030-31, starting with elementary school students and moving on to middle school students and finally high school students. And kind of bring young children along in that indoctrination. And when I read this, I quickly did the mental math. I was like, *“Okay, my kiddo is . . . Oh, they're going to be a senior when this rolls out, they'll be okay.”*

Stop. Wait just a minute. Aren't these *all* my children? Aren't they part of *my* one human family?

And I'm not here to shame myself or any other parent for having that drive to think about their own. And how it affects their children. But to say that we're called beyond those immediate calculations to a broader view.

So, here's Jesus watching the scene play out after this mother has come, prostrated herself before him. The disciples are incensed. They're yelling at James and John like, *“Who do you think you are? I mean, aren't I mature and loyal? Shouldn't I be at the right hand of Jesus in the kingdom? You got your mom to ask Jesus for a favor?”* (Laughter) And Jesus is like, *“No, no, no, stop, stop. Come here. I have a different way to show you. These questions about power and authority and role, these are not my questions. Those questions, those concerns lead to a different reality. You see how the Romans lord their authority over the people? They're tyrants, they dominate the people. I have a different question; I have a different concern. What do the people need? And how can we serve them? I came to pour my life out for the many, for all the children, a different way.”*

I'm amazed by the way that a story from 2 millennia ago still resonates. Humans are still human. Our world continues to be caught up with questions of power and authority and roles. We still have rulers and elected officials who want to *lord* their authority over the people, to *dominate*, control them. We certainly see that happening today. And also, that way of wielding power has always been part of our nation's story from the very beginning.

Our adult Sunday School has been talking about the *Doctrine of Discovery*. Yesterday, I watched a documentary, *Dreamland*, about Indian boarding schools. That Doctrine of Discovery emerged out of papal bulls in the 1400's. Edicts by the Pope that said that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be discovered, claimed, used by Christian rulers. It declared that the Catholic faith and Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for, and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself, even in chains.

That doctrine became the basis for European claims in the Americas. It was the foundation of Manifest Destiny, our westward expansion, and it's part of our municipal law even today. That Doctrine of Discovery is a way of domination, conquering, settling lands inhabited by others, forcing religion, forcing cultural and linguistic assimilation. That's *never* been the way of Jesus. It's never been this concern of his, even if it's been shrouded in Christian language.

I attended a webinar about a week ago called *“How Can We Reclaim Jesus from Empire?”* It was wonderful! And one of the teachers there, Reverend Dr. Randy Woodley, is a professor, a

farmer; he's descended from the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. He outlines what he calls a unified logic of domination, a framework for understanding how power as domination works through containment, maintenance of boundaries, fences, ideas about where people belong and where they don't. It includes the objectification of women, children, immigrants, minorities, the land and animals, making them subhuman, taking without return, and to depletion, whether it's human labor or the land and the animals. Forced assimilation, violence, abuse, all of these things. And I think these are all things that we know, but it was really striking to see that put together in a framework, a unified logic of domination.

I want to return to the State Board of Education social study curriculum, and one way that that logic of domination is operating today in Texas. There's been a lot of good reporting on this, and I think *Texas Monthly* did a great job. They wrote that teachings on racism, slavery, and the roles of women, Black and Hispanic people in American history were dialed back or cut entirely from this curriculum. For example, a lesson on the Tulsa Race Massacre was renamed the Tulsa Race Riots. You see how that puts the onus on the people who were slaughtered?

Within the curriculum lessons that treat religious passages or figures as historical fact, they rely on Protestant translations of the Bible that aren't used by Catholics, Jews, or Muslims, and I'm pretty sure they don't use our Inclusive Language Bible. *(Laughter)* These changes were not made by historians, but by *ideologues* bent on forcing *their* religion, *their* cultural perspective on *all* of our children. And there's a lot that we could talk about in this curriculum, but I want to focus on how Islam is being treated, how Muslims are being treated in this curriculum and beyond it in Texas.

So, I read in Houston Public Media an interview that a reporter did with a Muslim couple, a wife and husband who traveled from Houston to testify at one of the hearings for the new curriculum. And the wife said that she watched the speaker basically tell lies about Islam and Muslims, talked about how dangerous we are, including me and my husband, she said. And all the other Muslims who were there, dangerous to American democracy and Texas. And I think what was most hurtful was when that speaker concluded, the people next to her applauded. They clapped. She said, *"A lot of folks started applauding and clapping. I felt this feeling of fear. There were so many people actually supporting these proposed changes. It was unsettling, deeply."*

When a friend who works for the Austin chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations went to testify, to ask for better representation for Muslim students, a board member, who's also a Christian pastor, tried to deny her the ability to speak, because our governor has declared that organization, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a terrorist organization. They're fighting that in court. She was allowed to speak, but he stormed out in protest, as did another member of the board, saying, *"I don't want to sit through listening to a representative of a terrorist organization speak."* She was there to ask for better representation for students.

This isn't an isolated incident. It's not contained within the curriculum itself. I'm sure you've been seeing the political ads about Sharia law and Muslim invasions and trying to "protect Texas," calling Sharia "organized crime." If you've been here in Texas for a while, this is not the first time you've heard this, right? This is an old trope that's coming back up, and it's still not true. It's

still a bunch of lies. It's still fabricated fearmongering, objectifying our Muslim siblings, trying to make them seem less than human. It's how the logic of domination works.

Are they doing it to win votes? Gain power because they believe what they're saying, like they're on some kind of righteous quest? What I know is that this is not what Jesus taught us. This is not the way that we're called into. This is *inconsistent* and *incompatible* with the teachings of Christ.

There are a lot of misconceptions about Sharia law. What is it? I love words, and so I looked up what the Arabic word “Sharia” means. It means “way of water.” Isn't that beautiful? Water in the desert, the source of life, that which leads you to life. Sharia is religious and moral guidance to Muslims to help lead a good life. It's about charity and justice and religious obligations like prayer and fasting. We have these kinds of guidance too. The Sermon on the Mount, the whole of the Bible. Now there might be radical interpretations of Sharia law, but they don't represent what a majority of Muslims believe or practice, just like there are radical interpretations of Christianity, which don't represent what most Christians believe, I hope, or practice.

And I know that I'm preaching to the choir when I say this at St. Andrew's, but I felt called to say this publicly. There is no Muslim invasion. Muslims first came to this land in the 16th century. There are estimates that between 15 to 30% of enslaved Africans who were brought to the Americas were Muslim. There are accounts of slaves praying on their knees, prostrate, toward Mecca multiple times a day. We have manuscripts written in Arabic by enslaved Muslim scholars. Islam has been part of the tapestry of this country since its beginnings.

Nevertheless, one of Texas' political parties has a party platform this year that seeks that Texas formally declare that Sharia is, “an incompatible, seditious, subversive, competing enemy of the Texas and U.S. constitutions, and that its advocacy or implementation is a seditious criminal act worthy of criminal punishment, disqualification for public, military, and law enforcement service, denaturalization, and deportation.” It sounds to me like they want to make Islam illegal in Texas. And this is a party platform. It doesn't have the force of law, but it influences candidates and officeholders and policy. We have a legislative session coming up.

And it's always challenging as a minister to speak about one political party's platform because I don't believe in being up here and being partisan. I believe everyone needs to search their own conscience and wisdom about how to vote. But what is within my role as a minister is to talk about Christianity and how it is being misused and misinterpreted, no matter what party does that. Because the same group that wants public schools to teach that Sharia law is incompatible with the U.S. Constitution, that wants schools and businesses to stop being required to allow for prayer during the day for Muslims, that wants to make sure there are no laws that halal food be served in cafeterias, also wants to reaffirm the displaying of the Ten Commandments, to allow prayer time for *Christians* in schools, to reaffirm themselves as a Christian party. These two things are not compatible.

This is not the way that Jesus calls us. This is incompatible with the teachings of Christ. To lord our religion over another, to put up posters of Ten Commandments while tearing down Islam's guidance and disparaging it, to make space for Christian children to pray but to deny the same to

Muslim children? *That's* the way of domination. *That's* Christian supremacy. It's not Christian. There's a logic of domination operating against our Muslim siblings in Texas and in our nation.

Recently I've heard more troubling things. That there are many Muslim immigrants being detained at for-profit detention centers, people with legal status but not citizens, owners and operators of for-profit detention centers profiting off of cruelty, profiting off of innocent people, extracting wealth by causing misery. It's the way of domination.

Every legislative session, many advocacy groups hold days at the Capitol. They often have press conferences on the Capitol steps. The same is true of our friends at CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations. They hold a Muslim Day at the Capitol every year. This year they were not allowed to reserve the Capitol steps for their press conference. Boundaries, containment, where certain people can be and others can't. It's the way of domination.

Islamophobia has been around for a long time, but I'm hearing from the Muslim community that it feels different this time. Worse even than after 9/11, if you're able to imagine it. The sense is that a growing number of people just want Muslims to be gone from the United States. And I also hear a sense that non-Muslim people of goodwill aren't showing up in the ways that they used to.

Jesus taught that greatness lies not in the position or the power that we hold, but in our commitment to serving one another. Our Muslim siblings need our care and our support right now, maybe more than ever. Presents, kind words, human goodness, halal casseroles.

Right now, I think it feels like so many things are *broken* and that we can't fix *any* of them. And I don't know if we can fix them. We can try. But even if we can't, we can love one another. We can let people know that we see them, that we love them, that we support them, that we believe in them. We can reach out to our friends at the Dialogue Institute that host the iftar dinner here every Ramadan and let them know that we care. We can look for what the people need, what the children need, and we can serve them. This is the way that we are called to be in the world.

Our children deserve that the truth be told. If it doesn't happen at school, then surely at home. All children deserve to be affirmed as beautiful expressions of the Divine. Children deserve to see positive depictions of Muslims in the history that they read in their schools. All children deserve a place on the Capitol steps. No child should have to worry what will happen if their parents speak out in truth and love against injustice. No child should be separated from their parent for being Muslim. Serving *all* our children is our calling.

This is the way of Jesus that we're invited to join into. The way of domination, is embedded in our culture, it's been part of our story since the very beginning. Our religion has been, *is* being used to justify grabs for power and wealth. To lord, rule, and authority over the people, to dominate them. And when we see that logic of domination operating in our world, we are called to work against it, say, "*No, this is not the way. Let me show you a different way.*" It's also our spiritual task to recognize those forces of domination within ourselves and seek another way. To look beyond ourselves and our own and pour our lives out for the *many*, to serve *all* of our children.

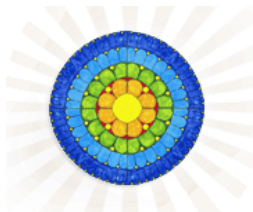
I invite you now to your own reflections.

Benediction

Rev. Carol Johnson

If you have come here seeking that spirit that some of us call God, may that spirit go with you. If you have come here seeking a way, may a path be found. If you have come here seeking community, may we be your friends. And if you have come here seeking comfort, may you leave knowing that the spirit of love is inside of you, is all around you, and is in every person, even if they can't show it, and goes with you now and always. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

14311 Wells Port Dr.
Austin, TX 78728
512-251-0698
admin@staopen.org