

July 13, 2025

Mike Mullin at Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Durham, NC

“God, gods and the Gospel”

God of all creation, may we be open to your presence in this space this morning. May we be moved as disciples to do good and to welcome your kingdom here and now. Amen.

Aldersgate United Methodist Church! It is an honor to be here. and I'm thankful to all of your leadership, clergy and laity alike, who are working hard behind the scenes to make this series possible. It's exciting to be a part of the movement of the spirit in this place.

And while I know there have been some introductions and information sent out, I thought I might begin with a bit of the story of how I ended up here. After all, you've got a guest preacher from New York that's not even ordained.

And if that last bit is a bit of a stumbling block, may it be a reminder that we are all called to ministry in whatever field we find ourselves in: teachers, business executives, students, parents, caregivers of all types, electricians, mechanics, financial advisors, healthcare providers, etc., etc. We are all called to ministry in our own contexts...but now I'm getting my head of ahead of myself, so let's get back to that existential question.

Why am I here?

Well, Pastor Steve contacted the Bishop of Upper New York and asked if there was a church that was doing great things in the realm of discipleship. And Bishop Hector Burgos Nunez suggested that Pastor Steve get in touch with Asbury First United Methodist Church in Rochester, New York. And at the time we were welcoming a new senior minister, the Reverend Dr. Michelle Bogue-Trost, to our team. And because she was still new to the congregation, she invited me to join that initial conversation with Pastor Steve. This was because I had been with the congregation for over a decade, and my title is Minister for Youth and Discipleship. So it made some sense to have me as part of a conversation about discipleship.

So as Pastor Michelle, Pastor Steve and I continued to connect, it was determined that I would take the lead on various connecting points, including welcoming Pastor Steve and Jill to Rochester in June. And now joining you all in Durham here today. And like I said before, it is an honor to be here.

I definitely cannot promise to have all of the answers regarding discipleship, but I can promise that I have a heart for engaging the community and encouraging growth in that arena. And with all of that said, it's probably about time we get on with a sermon. And discipleship seems like the right place to start.

The Greek word that is often translated as “disciple” is *mathetes*. Generically this term *mathetes* means student or learner. And I always find this to be in great encouragement and reminder because often when we hear the word disciple, we think of the 12 disciples and we place the term on some unreachable pedestal. Surely we are not called to be like those 12 disciples. It's one thing to talk about giving everything up and following Jesus. It's quite another thing to actually do it, even to the point of giving up your life.

And yet here we all are. But before you go looking for the exits or shifting uncomfortably in your seats, let's accept a less drastic understanding of this definition. A disciple is a student. A disciple is a learner. A disciple doesn't have it all together. They're on a path of discernment and discovery and that's where each of us are called to be.

Wherever we find ourselves in life and faith, we are in a path of discipleship. We are in a path of discernment and discovery. And if I'm being honest, my particular interest in discipleship fits well with that understanding of disciple as student. And so with our imaginations, perhaps let us put on our student caps just for a moment as we engage our biblical texts for the morning.

I've included our psalm as one of the readings because it's one of my favorites, particularly for reasons of faithful consternation. You may have noticed the title for today's sermon is "God, gods and the gospel." Alliteration aside, that lowercase gods is drawing attention to Psalm 82. In this psalm, we are confronted not with a monotheistic outlook of faith, monotheism being that idea that there is only one God, but a henotheistic outlook of faith: that the God of Israel is the main God, but there may be lesser gods as well.

Henotheism was a common belief in faith profession in the Hebrew scriptures. Often the Israelites would not reject the gods of other cultures. They would simply articulate that their God, the God of Israel was the main God. This is a subtle point, but has some potentially significant implications for historic and modern interpretations. And so in Psalm 82, we see a potential depiction of God, big-G God, hanging out with a bunch of gods: little-g gods.

One common interpretation is that these little-g gods are angels and that may be true. The reality is we don't really know for sure and this provides us with some wiggle room for interpretation and conversation. It provides some space to put on our discipleship caps, our student caps, as learners, as disciples. No interpretation should be off limits. We should be able to think and dream and posit together what these things may mean.

So as we try to better exegete, to draw out the meaning from these texts, we can do so with that air of curiosity in our midst. And whenever I embark on this process, I am always drawn to verse six in Psalm 82, which says, "I say you are gods, children of the Most High, all of you." I love this verse because it sounds like the words are jumping off the page and speaking to each of us directly in this room. You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you.

And lest you jump too quickly to those delusions of grandeur, please note the little g in the text. You are not the main God. You are not the big-G God, but you are still exceptionally important. For me, this is a beautiful reminder that we are all children of God. Every single one of us is created in the image of God and we are beautifully and wonderfully made. To quote the words attributed to Ethel Waters, "God don't make no junk."

But the passage takes us even further than this. It is true that we are made in God's image and we are children of God. But in the context of this passage that places us in the divine council with God, it reminds us that when we pray for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven, that there is an implicit through you and through me at the end of that phrase. Our role as created beings, as children of the Most High, is to participate in that creation. We are called as Christians, not to sit passively and wait for God to work in spite of us. We are called to live out our faith, to act as little-g gods as advocates of a divine council of justice and goodness to spread more life in this weary world.

And if this is true that we are called to be participants in a divine council, then the next question should be, what does this really look like? Or to put it another way, how do we live into this calling?

And this is one of those moments when our lectionary is most helpful as it pairs this psalm with the New Testament gospel lesson that we already heard this morning. And so let's take a moment to look at that.

This is a passage that most of us have probably heard before. The phrase "Good Samaritan" is even recognized by people outside of the church as a reference to someone who is doing a good deed. And that's pretty neat. It is nice when our faith is recognized in pop culture for positive reasons. And so it's also important to note that our familiarity with the text can sometimes get in the way of our interpretation and understanding.

Most modern Bibles include passage titles. The Bible I was using while writing the sermon has this to say: "The Parable of the Good Samaritan." This can be helpful because it provides us with a framework of the text that is to come. For starters, the following passage is a parable. This is a great starting point and a great reminder that our general knowledge can sometimes get in the way of digging deeper into discipleship. Let me explain what I mean.

Most of us are probably familiar with the term parable. We likely even know that Jesus seemingly loved to preach and speak and teach in parables. So if we were asked to define parable, then we should be able to do so, right? And yet I imagine some of us might balk just a bit at this request. On the one hand, we understand what a parable is.

Jesus talking about one thing while actually talking about something else. Simple, right? It's no wonder the 12 disciples were regularly asking Jesus to explain himself further.

But I think parables are more than just coded language. Parables had a purpose: to conceal uncomfortable truths so that they could be shared in group settings more safely. Sometimes this meant that Christians could share their message with less fear of oppression or persecution from the empire. And sometimes it meant that the direct audience would need to take some time to process the message before realizing that they were the ones being called out for self-reflection and introspection.

In fact, I had a professor in seminary that made this statement more pointedly. The purpose of a parable is to convict the hearer. And I'll say that again.

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This revelation has helped me immensely in my own biblical studies as I work to discern both surface level meanings and the underlying historical and cultural contexts of a passage. So then where is the conviction in this passage?

On the one hand, we start the story with an expert in the law. So it might be easy for some of us to jump to conclusions that Jesus is once again speaking against those elites in positions of power. And yet I don't think that is the case. I think the convicting message of this passage extends to the general audience. It extends to each of us, and that leads us into the second part of the title, the Good Samaritan.

Because this phrase is so well known, it is easy for us to forget what Samaritans represent because the title calls Samaritans good. It is easy to presume that the original audience believed the Samaritans were inherently good.

And yet if we hold onto those presuppositions, we have completely missed the point and the conviction of this parable. You see, in the eyes of the original audience, the Samaritans were the other. They were from the other side of the proverbial tracks or proverbial aisle or whatever. The point is, this passage was kind of scandalous. So let's break it down so we can better understand the scandal.

It begins by setting the stage. An expert in the law knows that you must love God and love a neighbor. And since he has an ear of Jesus, he asks for specific clarity about who constitutes a neighbor. What follows is this story.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him, and took off leaving him half dead. This is a pretty dire opening to a parable, but it also wouldn't have been too outlandish for the original audience. Certain paths in roadways in that area were known for being more dangerous than others. And roadway robberies were a real risk of the era.

The story then continues now by chance a priest was going down that road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Now in the 21st century, this may sound like the first point of conviction. What do you mean, a priest walked by and didn't help? As it turns out, this is probably not the reaction of the original audience. Instead, they would've recognized that the priest had a job and duties to perform. And engaging with this man would've made the priest unclean and unable to fulfill his role as priest.

So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him passed by on the other side. Much like the priest, the Levite had Levitical codes to uphold and tending to a potentially dead man on the side of the road did not fit into his holiness code.

And so here the story shifts. But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him. And when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, he gave him to the innkeeper and said, take care of him. And when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.

This is where the shock and awe hits the original audience. While they likely understood why the priest and Levite wouldn't help, they would not understand why a Samaritan would. That would be like a member of the Klu Klux Klan stopping to help a person of color. That would be like a member of Hamas stopping to help an Israeli operative. That would be like someone with all of the divisive Democratic bumper stickers pulling over to help out someone with all of those vitriolic Republican bumper stickers. Whatever that other image is for you, that's what Jesus was highlighting here.

And not only does this Samaritan stop to check in, they go outlandishly overboard. This is not a simple check-in or ride to a local hospital where the person is then abandoned to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. No, this Samaritan, this vile, this other, takes time to bandage the wounds with such lavish balms like oil and wine, and then continues to stay with him for a spell at a local inn.

And then when it's time to go on his way, he prepays for the man's continued care and even promises to come back and pay any additional fees and debts and charges that the man may accrue. The Samaritan went so far above and beyond that the intent of the parable could not be clearer. This group of people that you despise and dehumanize, they are capable of love that surpasses all logic. And what is Jesus' message with this parable?

That the Samaritan is our neighbor.

That the person we look down upon and despise is the one whom we are called to love.

And not just passively, but actively. And with the same extravagance exemplified in this parable that is the conviction of this story. Who here is ready to take on that call of discipleship? Who here is ready to set aside our trivial and not so trivial differences for the betterment of the kingdom of God?

Sometimes it can be helpful to hear a parable translated into modern context so that we might better relate to it. A lifelong member of the congregation has fallen on hard times and has found themselves experiencing homelessness and begging. On the side of the road. A local minister is walking by and seeing the person pauses to hand them their card and let them know where they can get them, help some help before continuing on their way.

A visiting preacher to the area sees the person and wants to help but doesn't really know the context. So decide it's better to just walk on by and trust the local system to do their job.

And then a young person who lives in a halfway house and struggles with addiction and who rejected the church long ago for personal reasons, sees the person begging. The young person recognizes this individual as one of the church members that led to their rejection of the faith so many years ago. And yet they know what it's like to fall on hard times and they are moved to compassion.

They go over and meet the person where they are, they take them for a meal, they walk them to the shelter and connect them with a social worker to help them and get the placement and temporary housing and receive the care that they need. And they continue to follow up for days, for weeks. They continue to support this person and help them back on their feet.

And I ask you, who is the neighbor who is representing God and Christ in this story?

As disciples, we are called to be students and learners. And we are called to be so much more. We are called to be practitioners. This starts with learning. This starts with discovery and discernment. This starts with being willing to check our preconceived notions about what it means to read a parable or identify with a good Samaritan. After all, if we want to be a good Samaritan, it means going above and beyond to show love and care for those that despise us and for those whom we despise. That is not an easy calling. And yet this is the gospel.

Gospel is a translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, which literally means good news. When we consider our texts for today, we began with an understanding that God, big g God is sovereign overall and that we as beings created in God's image as children of the most high or even little-g gods participating in the Divine Council, we are called to

actualize God's kingdom in the here and now. And finally, we took some steps to consider what that could look like.

What does it take to live out the gospel today? As it turns out, the gospel and the call to discipleship is much the same today as it was 2,000 years ago. Just as it was a conviction and a challenge to tell a group of Jews to love their Samaritan neighbors, so it is today to tell a room full of bipartisan individuals to love those that watch a different news cycle. And yet that is the gospel.

We are called to, when we see people hurting, we are called to give aid. Jesus stood up for the marginalized in all spaces and places and we are called to do the same. Prayer is good, but talk is cheap. Let us live out our prayers through our actions as we work to co-create a world where hate has no foothold. Where war is a distant memory where poverty and scarcity of resources like food, shelter, and healthcare are abolished, where our professions and confessions to love God and neighbor are actually lived out.

This is the God that we are called to emulate. We are the children of God, set forth to do the work. And this is the gospel message, the good news of radical inclusion to all that we are called to uphold. May we be disciples on paths of discernment and discovery, actively working towards peace and unity in our world.

May it be so. Amen.