

Pastor Charlie: Well, good morning. We're so glad that you've joined us for remote worship, Johns Creek United Methodist Church. I'm Pastor Charlie, and I'm so glad that you've joined us today. Whether you're joining us in the morning or afternoon or evening, we appreciate it. We know this is an important time for all of us as we connect with one another in worship, and most importantly with God, who guides us and directs us and empowers us every single day. And for such a time as this, it's especially as important. So why don't we go to God now in prayer and let's center ourselves as we begin this message.

Lord, we do appreciate your guidance and power and your wisdom. We need it so much, we're reminded each and every day that without you, we can't accomplish anything. And Lord, that's certainly the case with me now, as I, well, prepare myself to proclaim your Word. I need your strength and wisdom and power to do it. And Lord, it's a task I cannot do on my own strength so I desperately call on you to help me. So Lord, speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us do receive a Word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Where have you seen God in your life? We believe as Christians that God is intimately connected to us and to our world, so therefore God should show himself in some fashion, in some form. So where have you seen God or where do you see God? Many people believe that they can see God through signs and wonders and miracles, and certainly that's very biblical. It's like the guy who, well, it was in the news sometime ago, who saw, who felt he believed that the face of Jesus was in the bird droppings on his windshield. He truly felt Jesus was actually looking at him. Or what about that man who was also in the news who said he felt Jesus was looking at him through his burnt breakfast burrito? What about that little boy in South Carolina who caught a stingray and said he believed the face of Jesus was on the belly of that stingray? Or of course, there was that famous man who went to Walmart, and as he left Walmart, he looked at his receipt and he said he saw the face of Jesus on the receipt at Walmart.

Well, we do say Jesus saves. I know that's terrible, isn't it? Well, while I don't doubt the guy can make himself known in these ways, through miracles and signs and wonders, I will submit to you this morning that usually we look, well, too hard for God. I mean, oftentimes we think God can be found in arguments and theological questions and theological discourse. Many people will go on great exotic missions and pilgrimages and they'll say, "I'm trying to find God." And while I don't doubt that you can find God in those circumstances and in those situations, usually in my experience, God reveals himself in much more simpler, pedestrian ways, which is why so often we miss God. And maybe that's where you are today. Maybe you're trying to find God desperately, maybe you want to experience God so much, see God in some way and in some fashion, and you've been disappointed. Maybe perhaps you're trying so hard to pray to God and you've asked God to give you some sign that you're going in the right direction and you just have not seen God in your burnt toast at all.

Or maybe you just want to know that God exists, and that God is real and alive, but you haven't really seen any sign from God in the sky. God has not revealed himself to you, and you were very frustrated about it and you are very disappointed. Well, let me share with you again that you are probably looking for God in too difficult a way, you're looking too hard for God. Because this morning, I want to share a text of scripture with you that I believe reveals to us that God often reveals himself to us in ordinary ways. Usually God is right under our noses, which is why we often miss God because that's the last place we look. I'm talking about a particular experience of Jesus when He was having dinner at Simon the Leper's house. Because in this very text of scripture, we see how God usually reveals himself to us.

Now, to set up this particular scene which appears in Mark 14, if you want to turn to that, Mark, Gospel of Mark 14, excuse me. Of course, Jesus is having dinner at Simon the Leper's house, and in the background, what's going on is the religious leaders are plotting and trying to kill Jesus. They're tired of Him, they want Him gone. So they're trying to find a way to bring Him down. So all that's going on in the background as Jesus is having this dinner, and Jesus feels it, He knows it. He knows the cross is looming large on the horizon for Him, His heart is heavy with the reality that His time is short, His heart is heavy with the reality that His sacrifice is coming very soon, and He feels that. And so Jesus, the human side of Him, feels all the emotion that we would feel if we found out that people wanted to kill us. He was afraid, He was anxious, He was apprehensive. The room was thick with fear. And so this is what happens at that particular dinner party. Mark 14:3 I read to you, this is what happens.

While He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the Leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar, a very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on His head. Now, back in Jesus' day, it was a very common custom and ritual for the host of the house to put a drop of perfume on the guests' head. And of course, back then, people didn't bathe very much so I'm sure it was very welcome. And yet, here is this woman at this party. We don't know who she was, we don't know where she came from, we just know what was in her heart. And she took this expensive bottle of perfume, and she didn't just put a drop on Jesus' head, she broke open the entire jar and she poured it on Jesus' head. And Jesus' head and His hair was drenched with this perfume, and the whole room smelled like this beautiful perfume. It just permeated the entire room. Jesus was constantly doing kind things for people, and finally someone was doing something kind for Him.

But here's the interesting thing. The people at the party, the disciples, the dinner guests, they completely missed it, as they were trying to argue with Jesus about theology or maybe try to tell Jesus how to outsmart His religious leaders, they totally missed this amazing act and they thought she was being wasteful. And this is what scripture says, listen, "But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was this ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given

to the poor.' and they scolded her." They thought it was wasteful. And listen to Jesus' reply, He says, "But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.'" In that text, Jesus talks about this service. Some translations says that Jesus says she has performed a lovely act, other translations say she has performed this beautiful act. Why was it so lovely? Why was it so beautiful? Why was it so extravagant?

Because it was the last kind thing anybody did to Jesus before He was crucified. I'm sure this woman knew what was going on to Jesus. She had heard the rumors, she knew the mean-spirited things they said about Jesus, and she wanted to do something kind for Him. And she didn't have much, she didn't have resources, she didn't have money, but she did have this expensive bottle of perfume. And so she broke it and she saturated Jesus with it, she drenched Jesus with it. Can you imagine the courage it took for her to do that? She didn't know how Jesus was going to react, she didn't know how the guests were going to react. All she knew was that she had an impulse to love and she acted upon it. And here is what I believe. I believe God used that woman, whoever she was, wherever she was from, I believe God used her impulse to love to encourage Jesus as He faced the cross. I believe that. I believe God used that woman's lovely act to give Jesus the courage to face the cross.

In fact, I would submit to you that it might have been this very act that Jesus was the recipient of that gave Him the courage and the strength to face the cross. In fact, Jesus would say as much or almost imply it in verse 9, "Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told and remembrance of her." Jesus said this very act will always be remembered, and it is to this very day. So maybe you're asking, "Well, Charlie, what in the heck does this have to do with finding God, with seeing God, with experiencing God?" "If I'm having having trouble trying to find God or experience God or see God, what does this story have to do with it?" It has everything to do with it. Here is the message, plain and simple, God is found whenever and wherever the impulse to love is acted upon. Let me say that again. God is found whenever and wherever the impulse to love is acted upon.

Whenever you are the recipient of something lovely and beautiful and kind when you need it the most, that is God. That letter that you received that gave you the kind of encouragement you so desperately needed, that was God. That person who squeezed your hand when you felt so lonely that particular time and you needed it the most, that was God. That friend who listened to you, who really cared and genuinely loved you, that was God. That story that you read or that story that you saw, or that story that you experienced, that tightened your throat and inspired you in your life, that was God. Let me tell you, folks, it's impossible to get close to God without getting closer to other people. That's just good theology. The Bible says we can't say we love God and hate our brother. The closer we get to the Lord and our faith, the closer we will get to other people because we believe that we are made in the image of God.

And God is so intimately connected to each one of His creatures, of each one of His children, whenever God wants to connect with us, usually his MO is to connect with us through the kindness of other people, the behavior of other people, the kind of kindness and love that brings healing and wholeness and truth and beauty to our lives. You see, usually God is not found in deep theology, usually God is not found in great ideas. I'm not saying He's not, but typically that's not where you're going to find God. Usually you're going to find God through the behavior of other people who bring kindness and love and care and mercy to you. Think about that. God is found whenever and wherever the impulse to love is acted upon. Now, Robert Schuller once told the story about a prestigious and wealthy man who died in Tennessee. And some very important people showed up to his funeral, and after the funeral service, well, they took their limousines to the cemetery for the graveside. And on their way, they saw throngs of people walking down the street to the cemetery, throngs of them.

There were so many people, some of them had to walk on the street because the sidewalks were too packed. And they looked like simple people, they were not well-dressed. And there was a man in one of the limousines who wondered to himself, "Are all these people coming to pay their respects to my friend?" He couldn't believe it. And when the limousines finally got to the front of the cemetery, it was blocked by all these people, and a police escort had to come in so they could get through. And so finally, the curiosity of the man in limousine got the best of him, and he rolled down his window and he looked to one of the officers and said, "Are all these people coming to see my friend?" And the officer sort of said, "No, no, they're here for that funeral of that woman." He said, "A woman? What are you talking about? What person would be so well-known and popular? Who is this woman?"

And the officer said, "Well, on your way here, did you pass that school?" The man said, "Yeah." "Well, for 30 years she was the crossing guard there and all these people are all the family of all the children she cared for all those years." God can be found whenever and wherever the impulse to love is acted upon. Now, this is also true when we love other people, we can find God. So if you're in a hurry to find God and you don't want to wait for another person or another experience of receiving love, then just go out and do something lovely for another person. I tell you the truth, you will find God if you do that. If you go out today and do something lovely and act upon that impulse to love, you will find God. Heck, Mother Teresa based her whole ministry on this very truth. And when she was asked why she went to Calcutta to care for the sick and the dying in the streets, you know what she said? She said, "In every person I serve, I see the face of Jesus Christ."

She based her whole ministry on Jesus' commandment that said, "Even if you've done it under the least of these, I tell you you've done it unto me." And she would reveal it in a simpler way when she would speak to her group, and she'd put it this way with her hands up. And she would say, "What you do for them, you also do for Him." God is found whenever and wherever the impulse to love

is acted upon. You always find God there. So do you have an impulse to love? That's God. What lovely thing can you do for someone in your life right now? You have an instrument, a very powerful instrument, that you probably use just about every day that you can use to do something lovely for another person. And you know what? When you use it, you don't need to wear a mask, you don't have to practice social distancing. In fact, you can use it when you're being quarantined in your home. What am I talking about? I'm talking about a pen.

Now, how many of you keep letters, lovely letters, caring, lovely letters from people that have been written to you over the years? I'm sure many of you do. I do, I have a box of these letters and cards at home. And whenever I'm discouraged, I just go through these letters and read them, and they always encourage me. Why not write a letter of encouragement, of kindness, to another person? You never know the difference it's going to make. In fact, right now in the age of email and texts, written letters are special because you hardly ever get them, and they're so deliberate. You never know what a difference it can make to someone who receives an honest, authentic written letter from you that expresses love and kindness. Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they'll never forget how you made them feel." God is found whenever and wherever the impulse to love is acted upon.

About a half a dozen years ago, there was a story that appeared on CBS News, and it was reported by Steve Hartman. Some of you may know that name, he does a great job reporting on human interest stories. But on this particular story, in this particular story, he talked about a young man by the name of Mitchell Marcus, who was a senior at the time of Coronado High School in El Paso, Texas. And you see, Mitchell, he loved basketball. He always did, from the time he was little. He loved basketball, but you see, Mitchell is developmentally disabled, and so he couldn't play for the varsity team. But he was the team's manager and everybody loved him, everybody loved being around him. His enthusiasm for basketball was infectious. Well, during the last game of the season, or just before it, the coach was determined to put Mitchell into the game. Before the game, he said, "Mitchell, I want you to suit up." And you see, the coach had decided whether they were winning or losing, he was going to put Mitchell into the game.

In fact, he said even if they lost because of it, he was going to put Mitchell into the game. Well, the last minute and a half of the game came and the coach put Mitchell into the game, and he kind of ran out all excited. Now, the team did their best to get the ball in his hands so he could score, but it just didn't work. He would shoot the ball and he would miss, or he would boot the ball out of bounds and giving the ball to another team. But then what happened next was unbelievable. The opponent on the other team, by the name of Jonathon Montanez, when he got the ball next, he said, "Hey, Mitchell," he threw Mitchell the ball, Mitchell took it, he threw it into the air, and it landed right into the basket. Now, it wasn't the winning basket, but it didn't matter. The people ran

onto the court and they picked Mitchell up. And when that kid, that opponent who gave Mitchell the ball, was asked why he did this, you know what he said?

He said, "I was taught to treat other people the way I want to be treated." God was in that gym that day, make no mistake about it. You see, that coach and that opponent put love above winning and competition. God is found whenever and wherever the impulse to love is acted upon. Let's pray.

Lord, we need to be reminded of this in this time of such division, of such hatred on all sides it seems. We need to give back to the basics, what's essential, what's critical, what truly brings healing and unity, what truly brings an experience of you; love. Because we know, the scriptures tell us that you are love. And the whole witness and testimony of scripture reveals to us that whenever love is acted upon, that impulse to love is truly acted upon, there you are right in the middle of it. So Lord, may you increase that impulse in us, and most importantly, may you give us the courage to live it out. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. We're going to sing a song, another hymn, and we'd love for you to join us. Let's sing together.