

INTRODUCTION: In our post-Easter series, we will be reflecting on what it means to be Jesus' witnesses in the world (Acts 1:8). Each one of us occupies very particular places and, because of that, we each have our own unique opportunities to offer love and service to those we interact with. We have a "Jerusalem," a place where God has called us to be present and attentive to what He is doing and to join Him in that work. We are, in some sense, all missionaries; we are all witnesses of God's good news for the world in and through Jesus.

CENTERING: Take a moment to center yourself for communion with God.

READING: Matthew 22:37-40; Matthew 11:28-30; Matthew 16:24-26

REFLECTING ON SERMON & SCRIPTURE:

- How was your self-worth validated growing up?
- How do you understand, "...love your neighbor as you love yourself"?
- What obstacles do you face in loving yourself (i.e. shame, guilt, self-condemnation, anger, etc.)?
- What needs to be retrained in you to experience Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28-30? What would that process look like? What would you need?
- Which of the following "three greatest temptations" chase you down: I am what I do; I am what I possess; I am what others think of me? How does the foundation of being loved and valued by God help you fight those temptations (Matthew 3:17-4:11)?
- How does denying yourself (Matthew 16:24-26) and receiving God's love (Ephesians 3:16-19) impact your ability to be a witness of Jesus?

BEING A WITNESS:

- Reflect on the words of Barbara L Peacock, author of *Soul Care in African American Practice*, from an interview with Asbury Seminary: *"One of the dominant factors of my theology is The Doctrine of Love. And I believe that should be the dominant factor, the dominant doctrine that we address in the body of Christ, because that is the first commandment, to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And 1 John tells us that God is love. And so, because God is love, if we want love, we have to go to the source of love. And then God tells us to love him, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and that he first loved us. And so knowing that God first loved us, and that he is the source of love, if we want authentic, transparent, empowering, engaging, applicable, relevant love, we go to the source, so I go to God for love. I receive, and I encourage you to receive, and the listeners to receive the love of God, to open yourself up, to allow this immeasurable, this saturating, this emerging love to soak in God's love. And his love is unconditional. His love says, come as you are, you don't have to fix anything, you don't have to change anything. And all of us have done terrible things, we smoke, and we drink, and we curse, and we sleep around, and we lie, we cheat and we have idols, we do all things, but God says, I still love you and there's nothing you can do about it. So whether we acknowledge that God loves us, whether we acknowledged that we love him, he still loves us. And out of the love that we receive from God, David says in the 23rd Psalm, that my cup runneth over. So how powerful is that to have a cup of love running over in you? And it's out of the abundance of love that we receive from God, because God is love."*

PRAYING:

"Heavenly Father, let us remember Paul's words from Romans 8:

31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. 34 Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."