

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles  
December 15, 2024**

**“The Wisdom of Beginning: The Good That Is Yours to Do”  
Text: Luke 3:7-16**

One of my favorite theologians is the late Howard Thurman who wrote a poem entitled, “I Will Light Candles.” It goes like this:

*I will light candles this Christmas,  
Candles of joy despite the sadness,  
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,  
Candles of courage for fears ever present,  
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,  
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,  
Candles of love to inspire all my living,  
Candles that will burn all year long.*

Amid troubled times, I find those words inspiring and hopeful. Despite all that is going on around us, we will not stop lighting those holy lights in the darkness. Blow the light out and I shall light another. Show me a place of darkness and I shall carry light there. During Advent we light the purple, pink and white candles for all to see, but it is not just a simple liturgical practice. It is a reminder of what we do every day. Each of us. We are all acolytes, lighting those candles for all to see.

Let us begin with prayer: **Master of both light and darkness, send your Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice every day. We, who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, surrounded by dark spaces, but seeking and walking in your light. To you we say, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Amen.**

I have been reading Wright Thompson’s recently published book, “The Barn” which I saw featured on a recent segment of the evening news. The book is about the barn located outside of Drew, Mississippi. The barn has no historical marker indicating the terrible things that happened there. But this is the barn where, in 1955, a thirteen-year-old boy visiting from Chicago named Emmett Till was murdered. The details of his death shocked our nation and further shined a light on the dark presence of racism in our nation.

Lacking any historical marker, the author begins this book by noting that if you asked the citizens of that small community and others surrounding it, “Where is the barn where Emmett Till was killed,” most folks would have no idea. Worse yet, most of them would also ask, “Who

was Emmett Till?” The thesis of the book is that we try to ignore the past as if it never happened, rather than confronting and learning from what took place.

With extensive research, Thompson retells the story of what happened that dreadful night and what transpired afterward. One of the people he interviewed was Gloria Dickerson, an African American woman, who grew up in that community. She and her siblings were the first people of color to attend the public schools there. After graduating, all but one of the kids moved away. She graduated from college, was successful in her career and retired with distinction.

Upon her retirement, she thought about all the sacrifices her parents had made for her and asked herself, “What have I really done with my life?” In a surprise move, she returned to Mississippi and was shocked at what had become of her childhood community. It looked like the war-torn places one sees on the evening news. Homes abandoned and falling down. Abandoned buildings and broken streets. She kept telling her friends, “Someone needs to do something.” She repeated this enough that one of her friends finally said, “Why don’t you do it?”

Gloria founded a nonprofit organization to support education in the community. Among the objectives is to shine a light on the history of that community, to confront their past so that they might find healing together. It is a noteworthy task and challenging work. But it is important.

I suspect many of us have had a similar experience to her drive through town. You see the brokenness in the world. You see the hurt. We see people suffering in Ukraine, Palestine, Syria and countless other places and it breaks our hearts. We see refugees fleeing for their safety, doing what any parent would do to protect their families. We see the damage being done to our environment and we want to do something different. So much brokenness in every direction. Someone should do something. And like Gloria’s friend, there is that gentle whisper that calls to us saying, “Why don’t you do it?”

It is a good question, but the challenges seem immense. Where would we start? What difference could one person possibly make? In a world filled with challenges, what can we possibly do? These are all good questions. They are worthy of our thoughtful reflection. But we are not the first to ask them. They are as old as the world. What can I as one person do to make a difference? This morning’s scripture reminds us of an important truth and an answer to this question. “You can’t do it all, but we can all do something that matters, something that makes a difference, something that makes the world a little bit better.” This message comes from a most unlikely source in the Christmas narrative.

We know him today as John the Baptist. He lived in the wilderness, apart from all the demands and daily activities of routine life. It was a life he had chosen. And something about that made him appealing. People made the long journey from their homes to go into the wilderness to find him and hear him.

But even that is rather surprising. Maybe we don’t have the best of his sermons, but what we do have is hardly something that would cause people to make a long journey to hear them. He spends a significant part of his message challenging his listeners and calling them names. Standing there at the Jordan River, he calls them a “brood of vipers.” I’m pretty confident that

such a message today would likely get you uninvited to speak the next Sunday. He calls on the people to change their ways and to live differently. And they ask him that important question. “What should I do?”

Just as today, things are not working, but what can we do? One answer that he could have given was to tell the people they could go back to their homes and communities and turn their heads, shield their eyes, pretend that the problems aren’t there. It won’t fix the problems, but you won’t notice them and won’t be worried about them. John could have said that. But he didn’t.

Instead, he turned to all those present, as if looking at each of them individually and he told them to do what they could do. Bear good fruit. Do the good that is near at hand. The crowd wanted more details, so he answered their question about what to do by telling them to share what they have. If you have two coats, share one with someone in need. If you have more than you need to eat, share with those who are hungry. It seems like such a simple message, one of the lessons we learn in preschool...share. But it is a lifetime endeavor. Be willing to share with one another.

The tax collectors who were there by the river asked, “What about us?” He told them to collect no more than your due. It boils down to being just in our relations with one another. Don’t take advantage of those around you.

The soldiers in the crowd asked, “What should we do?” He told them to treat others with respect and not abuse their power.

The replies to those present were particular to their circumstances, but they boil down to the same core message. Do the good that is yours to do. Do the good that is near at hand.

Greg Ellison is a Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Emory University. In his book, “Fearless Dialogues,” he recounts a conversation he had with his Aunt Dotty when he was just eight years old. Even as a young child, he could see the disparities and brokenness in the world around him and he asked her how he could change the world. Sitting on her front porch she responded, “Baby, I don’t know how to change the world, but I can change three feet around me.” That wisdom has stayed with him throughout his life.

I don’t have all the solutions for how to fix the brokenness of the world. I don’t know that there is anyone who has it all figured out, whether we are talking about world hunger, violence, poverty, homelessness, racism, or any other issue we might identify. Maybe there isn’t one definitive answer. But what I do believe is that there is power in faithful people making a difference right where they are, doing what they can do. There are some people who have a longer reach or greater impact, but all of us can do something. Making a difference in this little circle of three feet, doing the things we can do right here is a great starting point.

In James McBride’s novel, “The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store” a tension is revealed early in the story. The neighborhood where Moshe and Chona’s grocery store is located is changing. Most of their friends and neighbors are leaving, moving away. Moshe wants to do the same. Sell the grocery, move away and open a new store. His wife Chona refuses. Moshe tells her that

he has already put a deposit down for a new store and she tells him to either get his money back or enjoy living there alone. She will try to visit from time to time. It is a decisive moment.

The author writes that his love for Chona was too strong. The idea of parking his big Packard in front of an empty house without his Chona terrified him. They will remain there. All their life. And that decision will have an important impact upon the people of that community. They make a positive difference just by their daily actions.

“What should we do?” the crowd asked John the Baptist. Do the good that is yours to do. Don’t ignore the problems. Don’t presume they are someone else’s problems to fix. Do what you can and believe that your actions will inspire and invite others to share their talents as well. Each little piece contributes to a part of the solution.

Let me conclude with a much more familiar story for this Christmas season. It is the classic tale of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ novel, “A Christmas Carol.” As you likely know, Scrooge is visited by three different ghosts who give him a glimpse into his life. He is displeased with what he sees. He doesn’t like seeing how his actions have affected others negatively. He is saddened by their perceptions of him. When he awakens, he makes the decision to change his life. John the Baptist might call that the moment of repentance. And you can imagine him asking that question we have been addressing, “What should I do?”

Scrooge begins to walk the streets of the city, unaware of what day it is. A passerby informs him that it is Christmas day. So, Scrooge arranges to have a turkey sent to the home of his co-worker Bob Cratchit. According to the novel, he wanted a bird “twice the size of Tiny Tim,” a bird so large that it “could never have stood upon its own legs.” Most of the movie adaptations and the plays end at this point with Scrooge doing this good deed.

But that is not how Dickens concluded the novel. There is more to the ending. Many cynics question whether Scrooge’s actions are sincere or whether the next day he returns to his old, stingy self. Dickens didn’t want to leave that question unanswered. The novel ends with the narrator saying, “Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father.” No doubt to it. What happened that day had a lasting impact upon his life. He kept doing the good that was his to do.

Christmas is coming. And for a day, if all goes as planned, things will be different for a day. We will be kind to one another. Peace will prevail in our hearts and in our world. The hungry will be fed. The poor will be cared for. The lonely will be invited around our tables. All will be well for a day.

But the invitation that comes to us from the shores of the Jordan River is not a prescription for how to live that one day. It is an invitation to permanent change. We cannot do everything, but we can do something. We likely cannot fix all that is broken, but our contribution can contribute to the healing needed. We don’t have to go to distant places. We start where we are. We work right here, near at hand, three feet around us and we do the good that is ours to do. If we look around at the brokenness and darkness around us, each day we light a candle of hope, believing that such simple acts can and do make a difference.