

Environmental Justice Bible Study

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Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me.

Across our American institutions, people – especially white people – are waking up to deep-seated inequities caused by centuries of racism and white supremacy. We are confessing that racism is still present throughout our lives and livelihoods, we are educating ourselves about it, and we are taking action to change unjust systems in solidarity with people of color.

Although environmental justice movements led by people of color have existed for decades, mainstream environmental movements have for too long focused on the leadership and needs of white people, to the exclusion of people of color. A byproduct of this reality has been the association of environmentalism with “saving the polar bears” and “tree hugging.” Although a connection with all of God’s Creation is an important element of spirituality, these associations can sometimes obscure the very real, often life-threatening, effects that climate change and environmental degradation have on people. Those people are often least able to respond to these dangers because of systems of poverty and racism that impact virtually every area of their lives.

Environmental Justice focuses on those who bear an undue burden of environmental harm, demanding that they not only have clean air and water, but also that they are a central part of decision-making when it comes to their communities. The United Church of Christ is a historic leader in Environmental Justice, beginning with a 1987 report, “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States.” The UCC’s work in the 1980s originated in its Commission for Racial Justice, making clear from the start that environmental justice IS racial justice.

<https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ToxicWastesRace.pdf>

This series centers on Matthew 25, wherein Jesus describes where we will find him – or rather, in whom we will find him. Each session will explore more deeply these six groups Jesus calls “the least of these”: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. These same categories are now indicators of who is hurt “first and worst” by climate change and environmental injustice. Through additional biblical texts and contemporary examples, this guide offers a theologically grounded introduction to environmental justice, helping us discern how Jesus is calling us to respond. Orienting this study around Matthew 25 is inspired by the *Strange New World* podcast’s two-part series on climate change. The podcast is an excellent resource for understanding the biblical basis for acting on climate change. <https://www.saltproject.org/podcast-strange-new-world/2021/5/4/the-bible-and-climate-change-part-two-jesus>

This study is oriented primarily to people and congregations who have some prior learning about climate change or racism and white supremacy. If this is not the case for you – still use this guide! You may find it useful to spend more time with some of the additional

resources listed throughout, some of which are introductions to various key concepts. The following are resources for a deeper dive into climate change, racism, and white privilege:

- 7 TED Talks on climate change: <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/7-best-ted-talks-about-climate-change>
- “Cathedral on Fire: A Church Handbook for the Climate Crisis”
<https://www.uccresources.com/products/copy-of-cathedral-on-fire-a-church-handbook-for-the-climate-crisis?variant=39321738346559>
- “White Supremacy and Climate Change in the U.S.,” blog post by FCC Amherst (MA) member Russ Vernon-Jones: <https://www.russvernonjones.org/white-supremacy-and-climate-change-in-the-u-s/>
- Practical Resources for Churches has a long list of racial and social justice resources: <http://www.prcli.org/webinars-res/social-justice/>
- *Climate Church, Climate World* – book by Rev. Dr. Jim Antal
<https://www.jimantal.com/book>
- “White Privilege, Let’s Talk: A Resource for Transformational Dialogue”
<https://www.sneucc.org/files/files/documentsmissionjustice/white-privilege-curriculum.pdf>

Finally, a note on the prayers included in each session. The opening prayers all come from the Rev. Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr.’s *Psalms From Prison*, which he wrote while imprisoned in 1972, along with the nine others who made up the Wilmington Ten. At the time, Chavis was leading the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, and in that role, went to Wilmington, North Carolina to join Gregory Congregational United Church of Christ in addressing violent attacks on Black students integrating the local schools.

<https://www.thepilgrimpress.com/products/psalms-from-prison-chavis>

The closing prayers all come from *We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People’s Campaign*, an anthology edited by the Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis. The Poor People’s Campaign identifies five interlocking evils: systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of Christian nationalism. <https://kairos-center.myshopify.com/products/we-cry-justice>

Both provide spiritual sustenance for the work of justice.

I hope this resource is a blessing to you and your congregation as you continue to prayerfully and deeply engage the work of Creation care, racial justice, and environmental justice. As always, please be in touch about how we might take up this work together – I love hearing from you.

Rev. Emma Brewer-Wallin

Session 1: Matthew 25 & Intro to Environmental Justice

This series centers on Matthew 25, wherein Jesus describes where we will find him – or rather, in whom we will find him. Each session will explore more deeply these six groups Jesus calls “the least of these”: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poor, the sick, and

the imprisoned. These same categories are now indicators of who is hurt “first and worst” by climate change and environmental injustice. Through additional biblical texts and contemporary examples, this guide offers a theologically grounded introduction to environmental justice, helping us discern how Jesus is calling us to respond.

Prayer:

For thy people’s sake, O God;
for the cause of the oppressed we lift up our souls.
O God, for those in prison;
and for those who are poor we go unto them with thy aid.

For those who live in poverty, O God;
for those who are hungry we feed them with thy bread of life.
O God, for the black and the white;
for the red, the brown, and for all thy people we give love in thy name.

For thy creation, O God;
for the wonders and blessings of life we give thanks to thee.
O Lord, for thy mercy;
and for the gift of thy grace we give praise to thee.

For thy peoples’ sake, O God;
for thy everlasting salvation we are in constant struggle.
O God, for thy peoples’ sake;
and for thy glorious redemption we are ever faithful.¹

Exploring Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did

not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

- How do you feel after reading this passage?
- Who in this passage do you feel connected to? Do you identify with the righteous? What experience do you have with hunger or thirst? Poverty, illness, incarceration, being a stranger?
- What kind of environment do you see described in this passage?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

- First, watch “Environmental justice, explained” (3:30 minutes). As you watch, pay attention to where you see any of Jesus’s “least of these” appearing.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dREtXUij6_c&t=143s
- Then, read these five brief descriptions of *environmental justice*:
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/21/what-is-environmental-injustice-and-why-is-the-guardian-covering-it>

Reflecting:

- Before today, what did the phrase “environmental justice” mean to you? What examples were you aware of? How would you connect those examples to those Jesus calls “the least of these”?
- What words or phrases do you use to describe your (or your congregation’s) environmental engagement? (For example, *greening*, *environmental stewardship*, *caring for God’s Creation* etc.) What did the video and article teach you about how the term *environmental justice* differs from these other terms?
- The video describes environmental justice as “breaking down and reimagining the systems built on inequities.” How does how Jesus’s description of himself as the “least of these” help you understand this reimagining?

Prayer:

Living Breath of the World, every day you bless us with the abundance of your creation. Give us strength to break the bonds that keep billions hungry, homeless, overworked, underpaid, and oppressed. Come near to us, put our enemies to flight, and allow us to restore the wholeness of your teaching.²

Further resources:

- The introduction to environmental justice video refers to race-based zoning. For additional introduction to racial segregation in housing, check out this short introduction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5FBJyqfoLM>
- “‘Hit First and Worst’: Region’s Communities of Color Brace for Climate Change Impacts,” WBUR:
<https://www.wbur.org/news/2017/07/26/environmental-justice-boston-chelsea>
- Additional short introduction to environmental racism:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrbeuJRPm0o&t=36s>

Session 2: Isaiah 58 & The Hungry

I was hungry and you gave me food

Prayer:

Jesus is the light
of the struggle
of the oppressed
Jesus is the light
for all those
who seek justice
Jesus is the light
for all those
who love mercy
Jesus is the light
for all those
who will let
their own light shine.³

Exploring Scripture: Isaiah 58

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover them,
 and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
 and your healing shall spring up quickly;
 your vindicator^[a] shall go before you,
 the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
 you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
 If you remove the yoke from among you,
 the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
 and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
 then your light shall rise in the darkness
 and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
 and satisfy your needs in parched places,
 and make your bones strong;
 and you shall be like a watered garden,
 like a spring of water,
 whose waters never fail.
¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
 you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
 you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
 the restorer of streets to live in.
¹³If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
 from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
 if you call the sabbath a delight
 and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
 if you honor it, not going your own ways,
 serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;^[b]
¹⁴then you shall take delight in the LORD,
 and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
 I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

- Where do you notice hunger in this passage?
- This passage refers to *fasting* several times. Have you fasted before? What is the relationship between fasting and hunger?
- How is a person's relationship with hunger and fasting determined by their environment?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

Watch this video on climate change and food security (7:30 minutes). As you watch, pay attention to any words, phrases, or ideas from the Isaiah passage that appear in the video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCiRzSgo3A0>

Reflecting:

- What did you learn from this video about climate change or hunger?
- This passage from Isaiah describes a restoration that will come when people take care of the hungry and loose the bonds of injustice. Given what you've learned about climate change and food security, what do you imagine that restoration might look like in today's world? What must happen for it to take place? What role might you and your congregation play in this?
- What do you know about who is hungry in your community? How might climate change or other environmental harms affect them, whether now or in the future?

Prayer:

God, who fills the seas with fish, the fields with grain, and the trees with ripe fruit: protect us as we fight for our birthright to abundant food on every table, every day. Amen.⁴

Further resources:

- For an introduction to climate change and its causes:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcBXmj1nMTQ>
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Session 3: Exodus 17 & The Thirsty

I was thirsty and you gave me drink

The “environment” in environmental injustice is more than just nature. The *environment* is comprised of everything that surrounds us, including: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat; the buildings we live, work, and play in; the people with whom we make up community. Environmental injustices can affect any one or more aspects of our lives.

Prayer:

Thank you God for allowing me to be alive
thank you God for giving me bread to eat
thank you God for the air that I breathe
thank you God for the water that I drink
thank you God for the sunshine
thank you God for the stars and the moonlight
thank you God for the trees
thank you God for the green grass and the brown soil
thank you God for all that you continue to do for me
thank you God that I'm able to survive the torment of this prison cell
thank you God for allowing me to see freedom again one day soon.⁵

Exploring Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³But the people thirsted

there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah[Ⓜ] and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

- Do you think the Israelites’ complaints are a form of whining or of righteous protest? Why? What do you think would have happened if the Israelites had not spoken up?
- Who has power in this story?
- What does this story reveal about God?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

The Flint, Michigan water crisis is one of the most widely known examples of environmental injustice. Watch this update on how the crisis has been affecting Flint residents since the story broke (13 minutes). As you watch, pay attention to who has power in this story and how this compares to who has power in the Exodus story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYiVHh4U4pE>

Reflecting:

- In 2014, were you aware of the Flint water crisis? If so, what did you think then? Has your thinking changed since then?
- What similarities and differences do you see with between the residents of Flint protesting their contaminated water and the Israelites demanding water?
- The crisis of polluted water is not unique to Flint. What do you know about who is thirsty in your community? Have there been any problems with polluted or contaminated water in your area?
- How else does water affect people in your community? Consider natural bodies of water, storms, drought – as well as polluting industry. How does climate change and environmental injustice affect those in your community who are thirsty?

Prayer:

God, we ask for judgement upon those who live in the lap of luxury while people starve, die from lack of health care, and, like you, have no place to lay their heads. May there be swift and stern judgement on all those who exploit others for their benefit. And may your generosity and peace be with those who take care of their community members by whatever means they have at their disposal. Amen.⁶

Further resources:

- The Guardian has extensive reporting on “America’s Water Crisis,” detailing high costs, contaminated water, lack of plumbing, and more:
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/americas-water-crisis>
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Session 4: Deuteronomy 10 & The Stranger

I was a stranger and you welcomed me

Prayer:

Holy, holy, holy...

O God of justice

O Son of humanity

O Spirit of love

come by here

come by here to assist thy people

in a battle for life

in a quest for freedom

Holy, holy, holy...

God come

Jesus Christ come

Holy Spirit come

together in unity

together in Holy Trinity

Holy, holy, holy...

Now

right now, O God

break the chains of oppression

now.⁷

Exploring Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:12-22

¹²So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ¹⁴Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. ¹⁶Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²²Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

- Several of the phrases in this passage are repeated throughout the bible. What here is familiar to you? What is new to you?
- Why does this passage remind the Israelites that they were once strangers?
- What kinds of environments cause people to be strangers? Consider natural environments, built environments, and social environments.
- Are there elements of your community or church environments that cause or contribute to people being strangers? What can you do about this?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

Watch this interview with poet Emi Mahmoud, filmed during the UN Climate Conference COP26 in November 2021 (5:30 minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av77E3le9ho&list=PLV0V26xTe_6UAtPFX_2SK275ToXI93orK&index=5

And her full poem (2 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOlxQSKK08>

Reflecting:

- How did Mahmoud's poem make you feel?
- Were you familiar with the concept of *climate refugees*? How has the poem helped you understand the phenomenon?
- How are Mahmoud's words, both in the interview and her poem, similar and different from the Deuteronomy passage?
- What do you know about immigrants and refugees in your community? How has climate change or environmental harm affected them in their home countries? How has it affected them here?

Prayer:

God, in the same way you guided María and José in their migration journey to Bethlehem, we ask you to guide the journeys of all migrants and refugees who are currently crossing borders to have a better life. Help us liberate ourselves from the tyrants, who, like Herod, misuse their power and position to oppress us. Guide our movement to end poverty, systemic racism, ecological devastation, and the war economy. We ask you to give us the strength of María and José to embrace this task, for it is through your son, Jesucristo, that we learn to stand up to empire. Amen.⁸

Further resources:

- This documentary from Al Jazeera describes a connection between climate disasters and migration in Honduras: <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/fault-lines/2021/10/27/exit-honduras-a-climate-in-crisis>

Session 5: Matthew 19 & The Poor

I was naked and you clothed me

Prayer:

Do not submit to the doers of iniquity;
be not persuaded by the unjust.
For our God loves justice;
And the persecuted shall prevail.

Put your trust in our God;
struggle relentlessly for justice.
For the unrighteous shall not stand;
but the righteous shall not fall.

Be patient for our God;
be content with God's love.
For the pilgrimage is trying;
yet the reward is everlasting.

Let not your soul be hardened;
be not troubled.
For our God loves justice;
and by God's will true justice shall triumph.⁹

Exploring Scripture: Matthew 19: 16-30

¹⁶Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." ²⁷Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

- What does this passage have to do with environmental justice?
- Why do you think the rich young man kept pressing Jesus for an answer on what is required for eternal life?
- What is it like to hear this passage – especially the instruction to give all possessions to the poor – from the perspective of your own wealth or income?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

In the article from Session 1, Dr. Robert Bullard said about environmental racism: “the same discrimination and racism continues to dictate who gets dumped on and who gets resources to mitigate floods, wildfires and other disasters. Of course those with wealth and political clout do best; if you have money you can buy bottled water or. The poor cannot go anywhere.”

Watch this video explaining the concept of *climate gentrification* through the example of the Little Haiti neighborhood in Miami (9:30 minutes). As you watch, imagine where Jesus and the rich young man might fit into this story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLnziDdYNQA>

Reflecting:

- Before this video, what did you know about the idea of *gentrification*? What has this video revealed about *climate gentrification*?
- What ability do you have to move in response to climate change or other environmental harm? Consider this on both the level of permanent relocation as well as short-term escape, such as a trip to the beach on a hot day or fleeing a natural disaster.
- What do you know about the poor in your community? Are there people facing evictions or displacement? Are many people unhoused? How might climate change or environmental injustice compound these problems? Are there neighborhoods in your community likely to face climate gentrification?

Prayer:

God, bless me with discernment to ask hard questions concerning the cause of systemic poverty. Move me with compassion for those who are hurting, suffering, oppressed, and vulnerable. Bring restorative justice. Amen.¹⁰

Further resources:

- Additional information on climate gentrification:
<https://www.nrdc.org/stories/what-climate-gentrification>

Session 6: Matthew 8 & The Sick

I was sick and you took care of me

Prayer:

O God, my God and savior,
thou art the breath of my soul,
the essence of my spirit.
I yearn for love;
I long for thy salvation.

O God, my God and creator,
thou art the foundation of my existence,
the undergirding force of my life.

I yearn for thy love;
I long for thy liberation.¹¹

Exploring Scripture: Matthew 8:5-13

⁵When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” ⁷And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” ⁸The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” ¹⁰When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

- The centurion claims that he is not worthy for Jesus to come under his roof, even though he has asked Jesus to heal his servant. Why do you think he says this? Who is worthy to be healed? Who is unworthy?
- This is one of several stories of Jesus healing people where the connection to faith is made. What do you think the connection between faith and healing is? Whose faith is required?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

In the article from Session 1, Mustafa Ali talks about *sacrifice zones*: “Environmental injustice is about [the state] creating sacrifice zones where we place everything which no one else wants. The justification is always an economic one, that it makes sense to build chemical plants on so-called cheap lands where poor people and people of color live, but which are only cheap because all the wealth and economic opportunities have been stripped out. The people who live in these areas are unseen, unheard and undervalued.”

Watch this video about the connections between where a person lives, exposure to petrochemical pollution, and negative health outcomes such as cancer and covid-19 (9 minutes). As you watch, consider how the idea of worth determines health outcomes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAFD-0aMkwE>

Reflecting:

- Throughout the pandemic, there have been many reports highlighting the relationship between social factors (such as race, income, neighborhood, language spoken) and health outcomes. How have you felt when hearing those stories?
- Jesus is known for his healing miracles, but he typically only healed one person at a time. How do you think he would approach a community like those in

“Cancer Alley”? How are those of us who seek to follow in the ways of Jesus called to act in these circumstances?

- What do you know about the state of health in your community? What diseases are common? What environmental factors might be contributing to the health or disease of people in your area? Think broadly about “environment” – this might include the air people breathe, the water they drink, where they live, who they live with, what they eat, and what they do for work or recreation.

Prayer:

Disabled God, there are thirty-two million people who lack health insurance, many of whom have disabilities. Sustain their bodies and minds. Give wisdom to doctors, compassion to the caregivers, and true justice for us all. Help us honor the personhood and sacredness of each body. Amen.

Further resources:

- In 2020, the United Church of Christ issued an updated [report](https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/breathtothepeople/) to the 1987 report, titled “Breath to the People: Sacred Air and Toxic Pollution,” identifying “Cancer Alley” as one of the Toxic Hot Spots. This page includes the formal report and a short video: <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/breathtothepeople/>
- Toxic industry in residential areas has a variety of harmful health effects This piece describes the connection between oil drilling and asthma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WntKTHyiUSI>

Session 7: Jeremiah 37-39 & The Incarcerated

I was in prison and you visited me

Prayer:

Arise, O God
arise, O mighty God
break the chains
of oppression on thy people
come forward and overthrow the wicked
arise, O my might God
break the chains
that have been tightened around my waist
tear away the leg-iron shackles from my ankles
shatter the handcuffs off my wrists
arise, O God
thou art my rock
thou art our might
arise, O God
and break the chains
of oppression on thy people.¹²

Exploring Scripture: Jeremiah 37: 11-16; 38:7-13; 39:15-18

37:¹¹ Now when the Babylonian army had withdrawn from Jerusalem due to Pharaoh's advance, ¹²Jeremiah set out for the land of Benjamin to secure his share of the family property. ¹³He got as far as the Benjamin Gate in Jerusalem when the guard there named Irijah, Shelemiah's son and Hananiah's grandson, arrested the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "You are deserting to the Babylonians." ¹⁴"That's a lie," Jeremiah replied. "I'm not deserting to the Babylonians." But Irijah wouldn't listen to him. He arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials, ¹⁵who were furious with him. They beat him and threw him into the house of the scribe Jonathan, which had been turned into a prison. ¹⁶So Jeremiah was put in a cistern, which was like a dungeon, where he remained a long time...

38:⁷ Ebed-melech the Cushite, a court official in the royal palace, got word that they had thrown Jeremiah into the cistern. Since the king was sitting at the Benjamin Gate, ⁸Ebed-melech left the palace and said to the king: ⁹"My master the king, these men have made a terrible mistake in treating the prophet Jeremiah the way they have; they have thrown him into the cistern where he will die of starvation, for there's no bread left in the city."

¹⁰Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Cushite, "Take thirty men from here and take Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies." ¹¹So Ebed-melech took the men and returned to the palace, to an underground supply room, where he found some old rags and scraps of clothing. Ebed-melech lowered them down the cistern by the ropes ¹²and called to Jeremiah, "Put these old rags and scraps of clothing under your arms and hold on to the ropes." When Jeremiah did this, ¹³they pulled him up by the ropes and got him out of the cistern. After that Jeremiah remained in the prison quarters...

39:¹⁵ The LORD's word came to Jeremiah when he was still confined to the prison quarters: ¹⁶Go and say to Ebed-melech the Cushite that the LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: I'm about to fulfill my words concerning this city, for harm and not for good. You will witness it for yourself on that day. ¹⁷But on that day, declares the LORD: I will rescue you;

you won't be handed over to those you dread.

¹⁸I will defend you;

you won't die in battle.

You will escape with your life,

because you have trusted in me,

declares the LORD.

- What do you notice about Jeremiah's environment while he is imprisoned? How does this change throughout the story?
- Where do you notice humanity in this passage? Where do you see inhumanity?
- What does this passage tell you about God?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

Watch this video on heat waves in prisons (20 minutes).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUhjl_qgEpk

Reflecting:

- From both the video and the passages from Jeremiah, how do you understand prisons as an environment? How do these environments affect people's wellbeing – physical, emotional, spiritual?
- How do prisons affect people in your community? What does it mean for prisons to be part of the environment in your area or region?

Prayer:

Lord, let us make a true fast for you: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free. Let us be the repairers of the breach in our broken society. Amen.¹³

Further resources:

- Incarcerated people in California are a significant part of the state's wildfire response: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XM5voSl6eWA>
- This video highlights the connection between climate change and conflict: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IMnDpLBdLU>
- UCC webinar, "Vibrant Re-Entry and Voter's Rights with Desmond Meade": https://ucc.zoom.us/webinar/register/4316360447939/WN_icnc63MjSk2j-2G2DBGqHA

Session 8: Return to Matthew 25

Prayer:

Give me the courage, O God;
provide my spirit with thy strength.
Come unto me, O God,
and enter my heart with thy love.

Grant me the moral fiber to speak out, O God,
that I may take a vocal stand for justice.
Let me be thy instrument, O God,
that I may do your will.

In the face of intimidation, O God,
help me to be brave.
Where there is injustice, O God,
in thy name give me the courage to challenge it.

Make me whole, O God;
let my personhood be active and upright.
Give me the courage, O God,
that I may involve my total existence in thy liberation of humanity from sin.¹⁴

Exploring Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will

put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, ^[E] you did it to me.' ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

- What strikes you differently reading this passage now, after exploring other parts of scripture and examples of environmental injustice?

Environmental (in)justice around us:

Indigenous communities comprise another group that is significantly impacted by climate change and environmental injustice, both in this country and around the world. Watch "Understanding Indigenous Environmental Justice" for indigenous perspectives on environmental justice (6:30 minutes). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zW7bS8CEgP4>

Reflecting:

- The people featured in this video share some of what their cultures teach about relating to and caring for the environment. What teachings (scripture, theology, prayers, etc) from your Christian culture would you use to describe your own call to environmental justice? How might you and your congregation be called to confess and repent from our forebearers' direct displacement of indigenous communities, introduction of disease, and disruption of historic lifeways?
- What from these sessions has continued to resonate with you? What do you want to learn more about?
- How have do your congregation's ministries relate to environmental justice? How might God be calling you to deepen these connections?

Prayer:

God of creation and abundant life, of death and rebirth, we give thanks for this good earth. Help us see the goodness in all life and reject the forces that degrade life. Amen.¹⁵

Further resources:

- “Indigenous Communities are on the Front Lines of Climate Change”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIGnve1cjOY>
 - Support indigenous-led fossil fuel resistance. In addition to a list of demands, the People vs. Fossil Fuels coalition includes organizations to support:
<https://peoplevsfossilfuels.org/demands/>
 - For further exploration of Environmental Justice, these are the principles of Environmental Justice established at the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>
 - This webinar from the United Church of Christ is a 30-year reflection on the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADSx853dpqs>
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