



"DISCIPLE: Make a Difference"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 6

Sermon by Mira Pak, Sam Johnson and Bianca Doria

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Mira Pak

After Michael Lamb coerced me into speaking (with him it's a fine line between persuasion and coercion), he then told me the topic: Disciple – Make a Difference. Outside of church, I don't find I use the word very much. But being a naturally deep thinker, when I think "Disciple," I think gladiator sandals and fishing for men. Unless the sandals have a kitten heel, and the men we're fishing for look like Thor, meh. By now, though, after four weeks of thoughtful exploring via the sermons here, we know at least the most basic definition of disciple: a student or a follower of Jesus Christ, spreading his teachings.

In an effort to remind themselves of that imperative, some people wear jewelry and rubber wristbands, carry mugs and key chains with the letters WWJD. Those letters serve as an acronym for the question "What would Jesus do?" This reminds the wearer to act in a way that shows the love of Jesus and his teachings. The only problem is that I don't think that question holds one accountable enough. What would Jesus do? Really? We KNOW what Jesus would do. Just asking is not enough, and the question doesn't necessarily prompt one to do what Jesus would.

I liken the asking of the question to a comedic bit by Louis CK. He's at the airport waiting to board his plane, first class. He sees a U.S. military service man waiting for the same flight, only coach. Louis CK thinks to himself, "I should really change seats with that man. He's flying to a war, to possibly die." Louis CK does not actually exchange seats, but he tells us how proud he was of himself for having had such a generous thought. He says, "I realized I'm a sweet man!" Does the thought count if there's no follow-up action? Instead of only asking WWJD, we should also tell ourselves, "Do what Jesus would do," or "Do it how Jesus would." Yes, I can see this is not good marketing. DWJWD? DIHJW? In addition to WWJD? How many rubber bracelets do we have to wear?

Do what Jesus would do. I can pretty much guarantee that what Jesus would do is the most difficult, time-consuming, teeth-grinding, least efficient, kind, Christian thing. When the 9th grader sleeps all through your 3rd period, and you later ask her what's going on, and she tells you that she's pregnant with her 3rd child (yes: 9th grader), I'm pretty sure Jesus would not respond, "Well, that's your problem! We are going to learn about semi-colons; isn't that nice? Eh? It'll be so useful for your everyday life." What would Jesus do? Jesus, if he taught high school English, would make the time even when dealing with the other 192 students that day to consult with the counselor, find Spanish-speaking social services for the student and her husband and their two children; Jesus would reassure the student that yes, he would work with her to accommodate her busy, complicated, very adult life so that she could still pass the class and eventually graduate from high school. And when the student came later and said she needed to drop out, I believe Jesus would not judge her, berate her, make her feel bad, or lay his agenda onto her life. Even if he thought she was making the wrong choice. The hard part is to do what Jesus would do.

When at a school in Watts, working with teachers there on how to better teach literacy skills, we heard gun shots. Ten minutes later the school was in lock-down mode. No one in, and no one out. The liquor store across the street had been robbed. Locked in that room, with all of us sitting there, looking at each other, most of us not from the immediate neighborhood, I said, "So...what vocab activity should we review?" A teacher responded with, "I'm sorry but my load is heavy today. Yesterday I went to pick up my student athletes to drive them to the track meet. Yeah, I know it's illegal, but there's no money for buses, so how else will they get there? I picked up one student from her apartment complex, and there was a body with a sheet over it on the lawn. The coroner's office didn't come for removal, so one of the residents had to cover the body up with his own sheet. The body's been there for days." This was around November 2002. There were reports of almost a death a day in the neighborhood of Fremont High School for a week-long period. What would Jesus do? If he were a Literacy Coach, serving schools in South L.A., he would make the time and the room to provide a safe space for the teachers to share their fears, their frustrations, their worries. Even though that is not part of the job description nor part of the academic goals and objectives, and even though Jesus might feel uncomfortable because he does not have a counseling degree and all this sharing is messy, he understands that when teachers are teaching in

certain contexts, they are better in the classroom if they are heard outside of it. One thing I'm pretty sure that Jesus would not do is say, "Not my job." The hard part is to do what Jesus would do.

And do it how Jesus would. In my student teaching seminar a few years ago, a student teacher told of an experience that devastated her. When a bright 10th grade boy was absent for a period of time, the student teacher decided she would conduct a home visit, find out what the problem was, and rescue the student back to school. Because the school and the student's residence were in a rougher part of the city, the student teacher asked one of the school security guards to accompany her. When she and the guard arrived at the student's home, they discovered that the student, his mother and his two younger siblings lived in the garage of the house. The mother had been ill, had had surgery, and the 10th grade boy had stayed home to take care of his convalescing mother and his younger siblings. The mother was fearful of the student teacher and the security guard in his uniform and showed signs of nervousness. The next day, expecting the 10th grade boy to be in class, the student teacher was told instead by another student that the boy and his family had moved overnight. The student teacher was beside herself. The sick mother and her three children were undocumented immigrants. The surprise home visit by official-looking people had scared the mother so much that she had, ill as she was, taken her children to safety. What would Jesus have done, and how would he have done it? Jesus, arguably the most famous savior of all time, would not have indulged himself in the savior complex. He would not have made the visit thinking he, as a middle-class, white American, would save or rescue the poor Latino child. He would have asked his Cooperating Teacher for advice about how to best conduct a home visit, or if one was advised at all. He would have laid aside his ego, and not gone into the situation like a bull in a china shop. What the student teacher did was not wrong, and she felt terrible at the outcome, but with a little more fact-finding and sensitivity, the result might have been different.

So, in addition to WHAT would Jesus do, we should probably remind ourselves, to actually DO what Jesus would do, and for those Christians ready to take it to the next level, do it HOW Jesus would. Even if we don't wear kitten heels or fish for men, if we are Christian, we are disciples of Christ, and our charge is to follow the teachings of Christ, spread his word through action, and make a difference in our own lives, other people's lives, the world.

Sam Johnson

One of my writer friends recently lamented that sitcoms – the kind of shows I write for – are bad for the world. He said people have grown so conditioned to neatly packaged half-hour plays with tidy beginnings, middles and ends, that we don't have the patience for big, messy narratives that seem to go on forever: the sub-prime mortgage crisis, Global Warming, baseball.

Whether or not that's true, it felt like a slap in the face, because I spent five years writing for a show that starred Betty White. And if Betty White is bad for the world, well that's just not a world I care to be a part of.

I've never thought much about my work as an extension of my faith. Most days, I'm just trying to think of a handful of good jokes and not get fired. But I do believe in stories. I believe the stories we watch on TV – like the stories we read here in church – can affect us in big and small ways, in ways we're not even aware of. They can shine a light on our shortcomings, while also appealing to the better angels of our nature. They may not fix us, but they can help us face the thorny issues of our times: race, religion, sexuality, poverty, power and its abuse.

I didn't always think of stories that way. When I first started writing comedy, stories were a nuisance that got in the way of the jokes. But I learned that while everyone loves to laugh, the only way they'll sit through the commercials is if you tell them a good story. And people don't care about stories unless they care about the characters.

So if I want my jokes to land, I need to write good characters, endowed with aspirations, hopes, fears, secrets, appetites, strengths and weaknesses. All the qualities that make us flawed and complicated. Because at its most basic level, TV comedy often boils down to one flawed, complicated character trying to win an argument with another.

Characters should be specific, but never perfect, because nobody's perfect, and worse, perfect is boring. As Leo Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I've never actually read *Anna Karenina* – but I did spend a year writing for a TV show set in a bookstore run by Pam Anderson. So I know how it feels to want to throw yourself under a train.

I became a TV writer because of my grandmother, which is remarkable considering the only shows my grandparents watched were *Gunsmoke* and *Hee Haw*. But my grandmother loved books. She was just a generation or two removed from the Europeans who had come to Nebraska and, like the Jews in Babylon, built houses and planted gardens. For her, planting the seeds of culture was just as important (*Hee-Haw* notwithstanding) and I would not have this career if it hadn't been for her encouragement.

She loved local writers like Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz. But she especially adored the California writer John Steinbeck. She liked his *Okies*, also sent into exile, George and Lenny, who loved rabbits, and the poor but

noble denizens of Tortilla Flat. They're good stories with characters who are specific and human, who have something to say to the rest of us.

My grandmother was also a devout Methodist. She taught me the Lord's Prayer on a camping trip, and when I turned 12 she gave me this Bible with lots of groovy 70s illustrations. Part of her inscription is a poem that concludes, "and each must make ere life be flown, a stumbling block or a stepping stone." I think of those lines often.

Every television show is a collaboration. A single half-hour episode is the work of a hundred people or more. And every day I sit in a room with 9 or 10 other writers, trying to think of ways to keep our audience interested. If I have any calling in my career, it's to be a stepping stone. I want my collaborators to feel good about their work and to succeed at it. I want to help them tell good stories. You just never know who that story will touch and how it will affect them.

I have had many great stepping stones in my career. One of them I especially loved was a man named David Lloyd, who wrote for Jack Parr, Mary Tyler Moore, Cheers and Frasier. He passed away a few years ago, but he was loud, intimidating, cranky, and difficult. He was also a terrific writer and, deep down, a generous soul. Several years ago I asked David to read a script I'd written with my writing partner. He said sure, so I sent it along. A few weeks later he called me back. But before getting down to business, David always liked to start off with a joke. So he told me this one:

A turtle gets mugged by a snail. The police come to investigate. The policeman asks the turtle, "Can you describe the snail?" And the turtle says, "Gee, I don't know, officer, it happened so fast."

I don't remember any of his notes on our script. He didn't like it much, I remember that. I'm grateful for his time and attention. But mostly I am grateful for that stupid joke, which still makes me laugh. Because stories can be edifying and ennobling and can help us face the puzzles of existence, but sometimes there's just nothing better than a good joke.

Bianca Doria

Hi everyone,

My name is Bianca Doria and I am a tumbleweed.

Yes, you heard that right, a tumbleweed.

I mean that I'm a military kid - I've spent my entire life rolling along from place to place with my family. I was born in the Philippines, lived in England and all over the states. Until very recently, I used to say that I have had more addresses than years of my life.

That may sound like a super crazy way to grow up, but there are a ton of great things about being a tumbleweed! I'm colored by every place I've ever lived, rolling along, picking up beautiful bits and pieces of so many cities. I think I can make friends pretty easily, and I have learned how to be happy anywhere. As a tumbleweed, you become super adaptable and ready for anything the world can throw at you.

However, there are a few challenges tumbleweeds like myself face: we don't have any answer to that question "Where are you from?" (Everywhere? Nowhere? Where did I live last?). Because we move so often, nothing ever really feels permanent - there is no such thing as a "home base."

Don't get me wrong - My Air Force kid/tumbleweed life has been a great one. I've made friends all over the United States and have seen so many beautiful places. It's just complicated my idea of "growing up."

After I got accepted to UCLA, I decided I wanted to move to Los Angeles and try to make a life for myself. I was a tumbleweed going out on her own! I found a great community at UCLA, but I knew my time at school would be quick and I longed for something more. I figured I would find out what that "more" was when I graduated and got a job and set up this "real life" thing.

But that weird "more," the idea that I would somehow finally find my place after college just never clicked. I got an awesome job - I'm a publicist, and I really love what I do because it's all about telling stories and creating connections between people. But, after a few years of grinding it out, I just knew something was missing.

That's when I decided to find my way back to church. For some reason, this just made sense. I figured, if I was still searching for "something" even when I felt like I had my life in order, church just seemed like the right place to start.

I found out about First UMC when Googling Methodist churches on the Westside. I grew up a Methodist in Texas before falling away from church in High School, and I thought I would start with something that might feel familiar.

It was immediate that this church was the place for me. From day one, everyone here was so accepting and kind, and there were so many incredible ministries to be a part of. I was plugged into Cross Brew – a young adult ministry led by Pastor Robert and Chaplain Keri, where we meet biweekly to talk about God in action in our lives – and eventually became a youth counselor, where I am weekly inspired by the incredible strength and bright energy of our middle and highschool students.

Just this week, during Cross Brew, Pastor Robert made a connection between our Bible verse and Obi Wan Kenobi, to illustrate the power in letting go (IT WAS SO COOL). Two weeks ago, during our shared community meal at youth group, I was talking with a number of our youth about the musical “Hamilton” - which songs we liked best, the moments we loved, and why the musical was so important. They impress me every week, and that’s not even digging into their thoughtful responses to our small group discussions or their amazing creativity during our games and crazy crafts.

Because of the power of this community, because of moments like these, and because of each and every one of you, I had finally found a place that felt like home.

Growing up a tumbleweed, I felt this incredible need to constantly be searching for something, to be proving myself, to constantly show that I deserve to have friends, or this job. But coming to First United in Santa Monica, I learned through our incredible pastors and leaders, through Pastor Patricia, Pastor Robert, through Keri, through Tricia, and truly through all of you, that God is real, God is love and that every person matters - that I mattered. That you could all love me and open your arms to me, simply as I am.

You are a part of a powerful community here at FUMC that daily, weekly makes a difference. Through your love and compassion, this church community affects not only the lives of people in Santa Monica, but people across this country and all over the world.

I know it’s sometimes hard to tangibly see the difference that you make, but I’m standing here today as a testament to your loving kindness. To each of you, thank you for the smiles at coffee hour, for being kind to me when I sit next to you in church, and for welcoming me into this community. You’ve made this tumbleweed finally feel like she can put some roots down, and call this place a home.

1 Corinthians 16:14 says “Let all that you do be done in love.” Please carry that loving kindness with you as you leave here today – The world will appreciate it and be better for it, as your love continues to make an incredible difference to me.

Notes:

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.