

# Keep Showing Up!

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Beloved Southwest Conference, Peace be with you! Please share this prayer with me... Open our hearts and our minds to the word you have for us this Day, Still Speaking One. Amen.

Last week I gathered with the United Church of Christ Board and the Council of Conference Ministers. One of the questions we discussed in small groups was, "In light of all that is happening in the world and in the Church, what keeps you showing up?"

What a powerful question! It tapped the deepest part of me, my "Why?" Our "why" is the constant value, that unchanging inspiration, which guides our thoughts, words, and deeds regardless of the circumstances that come our way. Sure, sometimes the intensity of life rattles me, bumps me off balance, leaves me asking some tough questions of myself, of other people, and of God. The mass casualties of pandemics and wondering if someone I love is going to become a victim will do that. Repeated videos of mentally ill people, or differently abled people, or Black people being harmed or killed by police or lynched for taking a jog through the neighborhood or a park will do that. Hate mongering, white supremacy, the inescapable reality of racism in this country, and the intentional and unrelenting divisiveness proffered by people holding positions of power will do that. Every one of us has been rattled, bumped off balance, and left asking tough questions of ourselves, of other people, and of God especially these last 8 months. So I was glad for the question that reminded me of my "why." It restored my equilibrium and perspective so that I can keep showing up.

Between a Wednesday and a Sunday last March I watched you show up to learn and implement new technology so that your congregations could be there *for* one another even though they couldn't be *with* one another. I keep seeing you show up reimagine and implement innovation after programming innovation so that people's needs can safely be met. You show up every time you take new risks and speaking out. You show up by challenging yourselves to profound personal and community growth around your own racism, white fragility, and privilege. I don't know what keeps each of you showing up. Please keep doing it. In a pandemic-burdened, self-destructively racist, me-first-and-me-only moment in our nation the Church needs to keep showing up!

When I answer that question, "What keeps *me* showing up?" part of my answer is the inspiration I receive from you, our congregation members, our lay leaders, our pastors, our chaplains, our conference leaders, and our staff. You showing up keeps me showing up.

Another part of my answer is deeply rooted in the values I derive from my faith. We cannot grow less of what we do *not* want this world to be. We can only grow more of what we *do* want our world to be. I keep showing up to grow the world I imagine for my children, my grandchildren, and for their children's children. I keep showing up because I want them and everyone in their generations to have the best possible life.

The passage Deris read this morning describes that best possible life. On the surface the Ten Commandments look like just a list of prohibitions. Jesus interpreted them positively in the Sermon on the Mount as God's "Ten Best Ways to Live."<sup>1</sup> God designed these ten values to bring about the reign of God on earth within the community that practiced them. In other words, these ten best ways to live are a roadmap to anyone having the best possible life someone can have from the perspective of life's Creator.

God's Ten Best Ways to Live also teach us: **I can only have my best life when you are having your best life.** That's the kind of world I want, a world in which everyone is living the best possible lives God has imagined for them. I am hopeful that's the kind of world you want too. Beloved, we don't have that kind of world right now. The world needs us, Church, like never before in our times, to show up to grow that world. Our mission in this moment as

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<sup>1</sup> The term used in Godly Play curriculum for the Ten Commandments. <https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/>

“extravagantly welcoming and affirming followers of Christ called to embody God’s unconditional justice and love”<sup>2</sup> is to work for every person to have their best life possible by showing up to make sure every other person has *their* best possible life. That was the message of the Prophets. That was the message of the Jesus. That was the message of the earliest Church. That must be our message to the world in this moment.

So exactly what kind of world is it that God’s Ten Best Ways to Live call us to grow?

The first four of God’s Ten Best Ways to Live speak to our relationship with God. Remember, we are framing things positively, as prohibitions.

**1. Put God first.**<sup>3</sup>

**2. Serve God.** (*God first on the outside*)

**3. Align yourselves with who God is.** (*God first on the inside.*)

**4. Enjoy God and this life!**

Faithfulness in our God relationship is the first step in growing a best-possible-life-for-everyone world. That’s why we can’t risk idols. *Idols* (#2) are those things we serve in ways only God deserves to be served. Idols only move into our lives when something in our hearts isn’t aligned with who God is. The names of God tell us exactly who God is, all of Scripture’s 100 of them.

John called his readers out on this very point. One of God’s names in Scripture is Elohim Ahavah, God Who Loves. And so John wrote “God is love. If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating [someone else], thinking nothing of it, that one is a liar. If [a person] won’t love the person [they] can see, how can [they] love the God [they] can’t see?”<sup>4</sup>

Or to quote Jesus, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.”<sup>5</sup>

On my pilgrimage to Birmingham last year I began to wonder what idols God’s people have served over the centuries that have allowed us to behave differently than the names of God call us to behave. My thinking is still in process, but I am seeing more and more how privilege, Euro centeredness, and whiteness have become idols even in the church. Beloved we need to show up in ways that grow a Church free from idols, particularly those idols, a Church wherein God is served exactly the way God deserves to be served.

**4. Enjoy God in this life!** We need the fourth of God’s ten best ways to live in order to transcend the consequences of not putting God first. Theologians call it ‘the curse.’ No, not hell. Guilt, suffering, unrealized hopes, and broken relationships in this life, all characteristics of less than the best life possible God hopes for us. This is the only commandment with a promise: if we learn how to keep Sabbath, to rest, celebrate, worship, to enjoy God and one another in this life, we all will live longer!

“We were made to enjoy music, to enjoy beautiful sunsets, to enjoy looking at the billows of the sea and to be thrilled with a rose that is bedecked with dew...,” said Archbishop Desmond Tutu. “Human beings are actually created for the transcendent, for the sublime, for the beautiful, for the truthful... and all of us are given the task of trying to make this world a little more hospitable to these beautiful things.”

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<sup>2</sup> The Southwest Conference mission statement

<sup>3</sup> There are several ways to number the 10 Commandments. Numbering used in this sermon follows the Jewish Talmudic tradition. <https://www.sundaysoftware.com/ten/number.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (1 Jn 4:8, 16, 20). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Mt 22:37–40). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.



What a fulfilling way to be a Christian, showing up to be a curse lifter, giving people back life’s beauty. We are Christ’s Body in the world. And just like Jesus,

<sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the LORD is upon [us], ... to bring Good News to the poor. ... to proclaim that captives will be released, that the [unseeing] will see, that the oppressed will be set free, <sup>19</sup> and that the time of the [GOD’s] favor has come.” <sup>6</sup>

Church, that’s what happens when we show up in God’s name, aligned with who God is! >>

Beginning with the 5<sup>th</sup> of God’s ten best ways to live, the values in God’s best ways to live focus on the second of the two greatest commandments: Love your neighbor as yourself. Notice Jesus’s positive framing?!

**5. Value and care for vulnerable ones.** One way to render the Hebrew for ‘honor your father and mother’ is to value (attitude) and care for (action) vulnerable people. While parents are mentioned specifically, Jesus expanded the scope of this commandment in both his life and teaching. We need to keep showing up for vulnerable ones.

The NIN offering being taken today “supports ministries of justice and compassion throughout [the United Church of Christ.] One-third of NIN funds support the [Council for American Indian Ministry](#) (CAIM). Two-thirds of this offering is used by the UCC’s Justice and Witness Ministries to support a variety of justice initiatives, advocacy efforts, and direct service projects through grants,” efforts all designed to benefit vulnerable people. This year’s Neighbor’s In Need theme reminds us that “all children have the right to simply be children.” Their vulnerability shouldn’t steal their innocence. “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul, said Nelson Mandela, “than the way in which it treats its children.”<sup>7</sup>

I was disturbed to read William Wan’s Sept. 15 Washington Post article reporting on pediatric disparities among children with COVID:

Of the children and teens killed, 45 percent were Hispanic, 29 Black and 4 percent American Indian. “This is the strongest evidence yet that there are deep racial disparities in children just like there are in adults,” said John Williams, chief of pediatric infectious diseases at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh. “What that should mean for people is steps like wearing a mask are not just about protecting your family and yourself. It is about racial equity.”<sup>8</sup>

Arizona is the worst of the 50 states for these health disparities among children. Diseases don’t discriminate. That means something about how we treat them does. Church, we need to show up in the fight for racial equity, and healthcare equity. Our children need us!

**6. Hold the lives of people sacred.** Like the other best ways to live this value calls for action and attitude. All lives can’t matter until Black lives matter. All lives can’t matter until Brown lives matter. All lives can’t matter until Indigenous lives matter. So let’s stop trying to change the subject by criticizing movements that bring into the light the ways in which some lives have been devalued and counted expendable. Changing the subject kills our neighbors’ spirits, and Jesus said killing the spirit was just as evil as killing the body. (Mat 5:22)

Church, we need to show up with bold actions which make safe the human bearers of God’s image who have suffered exploitation, devaluation, indignity, and lynching because their bodies are not white. This is not a political issue. This is a moral issue fundamental to what it means to be people of God.

<sup>6</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Lk 4:18–19). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nelsonmandelachildrensfund.com/news/nelson-mandela-quotes-about-children>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/09/15/covid-deaths-hispanic-black-children/>



Transacting the right action without an accompanying interior transformation results in political correctness. These last four years have made plain where decades of political correctness has gotten us. God isn't interested in our political correctness. God isn't interested in our statements or our progressive pride. God needs us to show up in ways that transform people's lives!

"Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking," wrote Paul. "Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what [God] wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."<sup>9</sup>[Rom 12:2]

That's the value behind the 7<sup>th</sup> of God's ten best ways to live.

**7. Keep your commitments. (Be faithful.)** Listen with me to Jesus's commentary on Best Way #7: You have heard that it was said, 'Don't go to bed with another's spouse.' But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your *heart* can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your *body*. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.<sup>10</sup>

A covenant commitment is us saying we are all in – words *and* deeds. I hope my showing up puts skin on all of the justice commitments the United Church of Christ proclaims. How proud I am to show up *with you* in ways that embody our statements and resolutions. That's what it means to keep our commitments.

So what kind of world are we showing up to grow so far? For me it's a world in which:

God comes first, so we serve God the way God deserves to be served, in ways that align with who God is so that everyone can enjoy God and their best possible lives. It's a world in which we all show up valuing and caring for vulnerable ones, holding the lives of people sacred, keeping our commitments. It's also a world in which we show up respecting other people's property.

**8. Respect other people's property.** Property v. Life has been much in the news over the summer. Framing these values as if one mattered more than the other is a false choice. There is no hierarchy in God's Ten Best Ways to Live. Best Way #6 Thou shalt not kill is no more or less important than Best Way 8 – Thou shalt not steal. God's Ten Best Ways to Live intricately and inseparably link people with property. We are called to find the balance and intersectionality between these values in God's mind, rather than to argue about riots resulting from racial injustice.

Repeatedly Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us understand what a riot is: "the language of the unheard." He did not say that to justify property violence, but as an explanation, and to lead us to what he said next in his Stanford University speech "The Other America"<sup>11</sup>:

And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.

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<sup>9</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Ro 12:2). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Mt 5:27–28). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/625058/martin-luther-king-jrs-other-america>



Beloved, riots are breaking out across our country today in the wake of repeated – decades and centuries-long repetitions – of injustice. Large segments of white society including large segments of the Church are still not listening! Only when oppressed ones are living *their* best lives will the riots stop once and for all.

Church, we need to show up listening. We need to show up courageously respecting people's property.

**9. Be Truthful.** The original understanding of Best Way #9 – Being Truthful – meant giving honest testimony in legal proceedings. In Dt.5, Lev. 19, Josh. 7 and Hos 4 the meaning of Best Way #9 was repeatedly broadened to include any deceitful, slanderous, idle, or empty conversation. That includes parroting hate speech, untruths, half-truths or outright lies, and seeing ourselves honestly.

The resolution that we are discerning together, "Awakening to Racial Justice," calls us to truthfulness. The "Be it resolved" sections open with an acknowledgement that we have, intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuated racism systemically. They continue by calling us into a transforming process of unlearning the 'false histories' and 'stories misrepresenting sins of the past' which we acknowledged in yesterday's opening devotion. Words matter. The resolution's words are a starting point. Awakening to Racial Justice may not be a perfect resolution. It may make us uncomfortable. We may not like the reflection of ourselves that we see in it. Its authors, contributors, and editors *have* endeavored to be truthful. My personal trainer began our first session by standing me in front of the gym mirror. She asked me, "Like what you see?" I replied, "Um, not exactly." "Well we can't change the mirror," she said, "so let's change what you see in it."

We shouldn't adopt Awakening to Racial Justice because we think we ought to. We should adopt the resolution if we believe we need to and will commit to living into that to which it calls us.

**10. Be content.** Being truthful with our motives is just as important as being truthful with our words. "Do not covet," or framed positively, "be content" is the only one of God's ten best ways to live that directly addresses an attitude of the heart. It calls us to be mindful of our motives. The people and property mentioned in these verses lead us to all of God's other Ten Best Ways to live. Coveting can cause us to disrespect the property of others, break our covenant commitments, or take the life – in body or spirit – of a neighbor. Being content isn't a prohibition against goals, ambitions, or even changing the system. Rather it invites us to always be asking ourselves, "Why?"

There is a proverb in almost every African language whose translation is: "A person is a person through other persons." The proverb defines the African concept of ubuntu. In the forward to his granddaughter Mungi Ngomane's book, *Everyday Ubuntu: Living Better Together the African Way*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu described why he kept showing up. "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours."

Beloved, whether it's your local church, the public square, the wider church board room, or the voting booth, I show up for the same reason: to grow a world in which every person is a person through other persons, a world in which you are living your best possible life which allows me to live my best possible life, a world that reflects the world God hopes for all of us.

Church, I want us all to keep showing up to grow that world together. Election results won't change our mission. Pandemics may change the *ways* in which we do it, but not *why or what*. Our values of continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and transforming lives keep us showing up courageously and continuously until the just world God intends is real for everyone. Beloved Church, keep showing up.