

# Let's Find Courage to Create Community in the Face of Chaos

**Old Testament: Psalm 119:33-40    New Testament: Matthew 25:31-46**

Let's Find Courage to Create Community in the Face of Chaos!

We cannot help but be affected by the painful chaos that staggers across the stage directly in front of our faces today.

To be human today is to live in the midst of human chaos.

Although unhealthy chaos has marked our national existence prior to the current administration, the current administration has made it explicitly clear that it cannot or will not protect millions upon millions of us—

From disease!

Economic calamity!

Inequality of race and gender!

Interference by foreign dictators!

Climate change and the environmental damage unleashed!

One set of laws for the rich and mostly white and another set of laws for the poor and mostly black and brown.

In some ways, we are numbed by what happens on almost a daily basis. There is too much suffering, violence, robbery, cruelty, meanness, sheer callousness to absorb.

209,000 deaths by Covid in the United States is almost too much to GRASP, but the death of the Arkansas school superintendent, Jody Jenkins, a 57 year old man, that we sadly understand.

And now we understand even more as the disease strikes the center of the government and the President himself.

We pray for him and his family's recovery even as we criticize his policies and his empty promises.

When we look back—whenever that is—countless families and communities are going to be staring at the empty chair, the shortened life, the fatherless and motherless living room.

Lost jobs, the lost businesses, lost income and depleted savings mount. Four million jobs permanently lost. Four million permanently unemployed, not temporarily unemployed.

It is by federal government intervention alone that evictions have not thrown more and more people into the streets. You see what the government can do when our elected officials are moved to take action to meet people's basic needs.

In one of his public statements before he became ill, the President said everything was going great before Covid struck.

Even if you accept that—which I don't—it's like saying, "Everything was great before the war started."

The fact is that life never remains static.

The world is constantly changing.

You and I constantly change even if we do not always notice it.

The present and the future are what matter.

While the significance of the past lies chiefly in understanding the consequences of past decisions and past events which we are still living with today—and must still repair and resolve.

On the other hand—apart from this pandemic, which we fervently pray will come to an end sooner rather than later—and even in spite of the crushing murders of Black men and Black women by lawless law enforcement—I do believe that—in the Big Picture— we live in an era of growing hope, progress and freedom.

Personally, I believe that much of the crushing brutality we see breaking out like an epidemic everywhere is a desperate attempt to halt progress and undermine freedoms that humanity has either already won or begun to win.

It may be my deluded opinion—still it is mine— that in our lifetimes we have seen and experienced greater Spiritual freedom!

Freedom to worship God as your heart and mind lead you.

Women's freedom!

Freedom of artistic expression!

Freedom to be who you really are!

Freedom to communicate, love, grow much older and healthier than people could imagine a generation ago.

As a result of expanded voting rights, access to higher education and the creation and expansion of Black and Brown owned businesses and entrepreneurs, a large section of peoples of color have advanced and are refusing to go backwards.

Still, chaos wants to be our stupid king.!

Will we submit?

Or soar?

Are we going to go back to sleep?

Or continue to awaken to the possibilities that go with advances in self knowledge, scientific knowledge and moral understanding?

A few years ago, a large passenger plane was heading toward a fatal crash over Canada.

When the passengers were informed, many of them panicked.

It's a natural thing to panic.

But it's a supernatural thing to pray and to meditate.

The prayers and meditations of people in that plane aided the panicked.

Maybe the people seeking spiritual direction were inwardly panicked as well, but they had had practice going inward to turn toward God.

Fortunately, that plan did not crash.

Still those with a spiritual connection to the Universal Creator were able to manage the uncertainty and the danger in a way others were not.

Amidst his endlessly long 119 verse prayer, the Psalmist says:

“Turn my heart.”

“Turn my eyes.”

“Turn away.”

Turn!

Turn my heart from the chaos!

Turn my soul from the confusion!

Turn my mind away from disabling fear!

Turn **toward**—The Creative Power of God!

Turn **into** the space where God’s grace and the Spirit’s lively scheming—is the controlling power and energy for the living of your life.

Think of yourself as having this kind of inner compass.

With this internal compass, you are able to orient your thoughts in the right direction.

You are able to create order out of chaos and opportunity out of crisis.

You are able to stand in your center—let God re-enter!

Now feel the power moving within you.

Notice the power growing within your centered self.....

Now find others who are walking in the same direction.

Take their hand. Bump their elbow! Meet eyes through your masks.

Together, find the courage to create community in the face of chaos.

We are hearing again these days about Law and Order.

If you remember, when the protests began over George Floyd's killing, I said we are going to have a backlash called Law and Order.

Well, here it is. But law and order is nothing but propaganda for an election season.

We need Love and Order

We need to take **God's orders** to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

How do we do that?

We pay attention.

We pay attention to our relationship with our neighbor.

Who is our neighbor?

Jesus said it is the person left beaten up by the side of the road.

The person with Covid.

The family who has lost someone to Covid.

You!—whose black or brown life does matter!

You—an essential worker—a teacher, bus driver, food service, custodian, nurse, hospital worker, office worker, child care worker—you are getting up every day and embodying the subject of this message—creating community in the face of chaos.

Jesus said the sick person, the hungry person, the thirsty person, the person with worn and ragged clothes, the person in prison, the stranger was our neighbor.

Why? Because that person was Christ!

Christ is in this person.

If you or I do not think Christ is in this sick person, this stranger, this hungry and thirsty person, this person in worn and ragged clothes, this person in prison—if we need, in some way, to dehumanize this person, abuse this person, denigrate this

person, then we need to understand why we need to do that. Because the problem is in us, not them.

On the other hand, when do realize Christ is in this sick person, this stranger, this hungry and thirsty person, this person in worn and ragged clothes, this person in prison—then we are part of the process of creating the community of God, the kingdom of God.

And that, friends, is our brave and bold answer to chaos.

I want to close with a story of how some students managed to struggle through chaos to create community among themselves.

I would call this particular pathway the Lily Tomlin way: “Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.”

Here’s what happened, says teacher Linda Christensen.....

Jim was going blind because of a hereditary disease.

It didn’t happen overnight, but he struggled with terror at his oncoming blindness.

Because he was steadily losing his eyesight, he was clumsy in the classroom.

He couldn’t see where he was going.

He knocked into people and desks.

He accidentally overturned piles of books.

Students responded with laughter or anger. Some days he cried silently into the fold of his arms.

He told me, “I know the darkness is coming.”

Several male students in the class made fun of him for crying as well.

One day, Amber was in a typically bad mood, hunched inside her too-big coat and snarling at anyone who came near. When Jim bumped her desk on the way to the

pencil sharpener and her books and papers tumbled on the floor, she blew up at him for bumbling around the room.

Jim apologized profusely and retreated into his shell after her attack.

A few days later I gave an assignment for students to write about their ancestors, their people.

First, they read Margaret Walker's poems "For My People" and "Lineage," and others.

I told them they could imagine their people as their immediate ancestors, their race, their nationality, or gender.

### **To My People with Retinitis Pigmentosa**

"Sometimes I hate you  
 like the disease I have been plagued with.  
 I despise the "sight" of you  
 seeing myself in your eyes.  
 I see you as if it were you  
 who intentionally damned me to darkness.  
 I sometimes wish  
 I was not your brother;  
 that I could stop the setting of the sun  
 and wash my hands of you forever  
 and never look back except with pity,  
 but I cannot.  
 So I embrace you,  
 the sun continues to set  
 as I walk into darkness holding your hand."

Students were silenced.

Tears rolled.

Kevin said, "Wow, man. That's hard."

Amber apologized to Jim in front of the class.

At the end of the year she told me that her encounter with Jim was one of the events that changed her.

She learned to stop and think about why someone else might be doing what they're doing, instead of immediately jumping to the conclusion that they were trying to annoy her.

It was a small crack.

A passage from one world to another.

Allowing the class to become a community.

**Let's find courage to create community in the face of chaos.**

Amen.

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Law implies rules, statutes, ordinances.

Instruction implies learning.

Imparted learning.

Learning coming from some source.

We are more in need of instruction than law.

Learning has more value than rules.

Not that we don't need rules.

But Law—which in the Hebrew is Torah—means instruction.

It's part of the process of gaining knowledge—and wisdom.

Psalm 119 is a meditation on the Law. Instruction.

The basic idea of the Psalm is that when a person orients themselves toward God's instruction—life has meaning.

In fact, the Psalmist's real insight is that God alone give life.

The source of spiritual fulfillment is God alone.

From the deep self within and from the great self beyond—God—comes life and knowledge.

This orientation is especially important in a time of chaos such as the one in which we live.

If you orient yourself toward God—the chaos we experience around us and within us may be met with balance, serenity, even confidence.

## 2

In the fall of 2010, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life released a survey on religious knowledge in the United States. The survey found that Americans who identified as Christian knew less about world religions in general, and often less about their own religious tradition in particular, than atheists, agnostics, or Jews.<sup>3</sup> Forty-three percent of Christians did not, for example, know that "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is not one of the Ten Commandments. The survey illustrated a disconnect within American Christianity between religious *feeling*, which appears to be ample, and religious *knowledge*, which is much more scarce. Why study my faith, when I can feel it in my heart?

This section of Psalm 119 affirms no such division between knowledge, discipline, and faith. In verses 33-40, *keeping* the law goes hand-in-hand with *learning* the law. Moreover, the disciplined engagement of religious law is itself spiritual fulfillment. Knowing and following God's precepts does nothing less than he

stack of imperatives in verses 33-40 may make the psalmist seem demanding, but his pleas come out of a deeply-felt realization that understanding comes from God, not through any accomplishment of self.

To say, "Teach me, O Lord," is to acknowledge that God is teacher. In this unit within Psalm 119, God is also leader, turner, confirmer, and giver -- giver of understanding and giver of life. Life cannot be separated from understanding. We would do well, then, to make the psalmist's prayer our own: "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart."