



**DIALOGUE SERMON: "EVEN SO, WE ..."**  
**SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 13:8-11**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**Sunday, September 10, 2023**  
Marcia Mount Shoop, Micah Hayes, Ray Landis, Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks

Romans 13: 8-11

13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 13:9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. 13:11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.

***Even So, We ...***

*Marcia Mount Shoop*

*This fall we are going to be reading some love letters together—the letters that Paul or those trading on Paul's social capital, wrote to the burgeoning Jesus following movement in the decades after Jesus' public execution at the hands of Empire.*

*These letters are often encouraging words, words that clarify what makes a faithful believer in a world where being faithful doesn't always get you very far by the world's standards. These letters invite believers to numerous kinds of gut checks and come to Jesus moments.*

*Our fall theme, "Even so, we ..." comes from one of these letters—even with all the turbulence of the world and the temptation to give up, even with all the risk that comes from speaking truth to power, even with all the losses that seem to just keep coming—even so, we stand, we speak, we stretch, we believe.*

*The even so—well that's the story of us, too, Grace Covenant. A church defying so many odds. A church finding our way toward mutual liberation when the way can be hard to see in a world so addicted to oppression and division.*

*These next few months will be exploring how liberation emerges out of things like conflict, loss, tension, and courage just as liberation emerges from open spaces, creativity, and support.*

*One of the joys of my job as Pastor/Head of Staff is that I am immersed in the stories and the beautiful things unfolding at every level of this faith community. I experience the powerful ways we are being transformed in the midst of challenges and unknowns. There are many reasons for the stories of how we find ourselves at GCPC to include the “even so’s...” from church trauma, to systemic oppression, to white supremacy, to all the ways this world can chew people up and spit us out.*

*The “even so” is the Spirit infused energy of this community—that with all the reasons to not trust church, or not believe the world can change, even so—we are here, we are together, we are a vibrant, growing, and transforming community.*

*We don’t often take the time to savor and honor those “even so’s” in our journey. Today is a day where we will savor some even so’s from some of the GCPC staff—we’ll start with someone who you don’t often get to hear from, because he is working hard to support our ministry beyond these walls. Micah Hayes is a remarkable human—a gift to us. I’m grateful for his willingness to come and be on this side of the camera today!*

### Micah

- Intro. Some of you know, however some of you may not know...prison experience
- Anti-racist talk in prison- How I was giving out the book “How to Be an Antiracist”
- How to show up - In prison they wanted me to accept the identity of convict and inmate, even so, I chose to rebuke the stigmas that were associated with that mindset and strive towards showing up as a person with values and integrity.
- Talk about courage. The fear from situations facing white supremacy in prison, even so I chose to be courageous and speak out against it. I was threatened even so, I spoke out. I was scared, even so I continued to speak out
- Three things:
  - Speaking out in the face of fear, courage to speak out
  - How to show up (contrary to the beliefs most people will have about my background); show up with values, integrity, belief in change
  - Say about his story (something brief)
  - Thread in a few sentences to thread it into the larger society.
  - Being scared of speaking out
  - Even if you’re scared of repercussions—I did it, we can do it.
  - Maybe include being a dad (AKKP)--threat came from the fact that I had a son who is Black, with a Black woman.
  - (threatened, stigmatized, even so...)

- GCPC living out the values, feeling accepted

*MMS: Micah, you took a chance on us, too. And the blessings are mutual. Mutual. Micah has been here two years now. Ray Landis has been here for two weeks as our new Director of Music Ministries.*

## Ray

How can worship be an act of justice? This has become a guiding question in my music ministry. This can mean examining the texts of our songs and hymns and expanding our language to affirm all expressions of God's creation. It can mean engaging people through a variety of artistic expressions. It can mean lifting up voices that have often been silenced.

In the last church I served, I learned how threatening these ideas can be to people who wanted to maintain the status quo. One church elder became so angry after I invited a young woman to add liturgical movement to a song that he left the service. Later when I tried to have a conversation with him, he screamed at me, saying that idea (and others) were stupid and I should think about what I'm doing. I said I was thinking about the people whose spirits had been fed by these different expressions - some who shared they had felt seen for the first time. He just got angrier and even gave me a shove. I had a hard time understanding his reaction and felt a deep sadness that he could not see the movement of the Spirit.

I have come to realize that his anger was not so much that he disagreed with me, but that he was so afraid of rocking the boat and offending a small group in the church who were resistant to new ideas. I was witness to the extreme reaction white people often exhibit when faced with change - so fearing a loss of control and status.

While I was blessed to work with wonderful people who were hungry to grow, the relentless resistance and bullying from a small group became disruptive and exhausting. I longed to use my energy on something more generative than resistance. I even began to question whether I was called to continue in church music ministry.

Even so, I trusted God was at work.

As I prayed and discerned, God provided me with an answer. God led me here. Here, to a place where I can fully embody the convergence of my vocation as a music

minister with my call to social justice. Where I can journey with a community committed to learning and growing, even when it's hard.

It is liberating to share this experience out loud. I recognize it as a turning point which has led me to greater clarity and courage. I believe that God has used it to prepare me for the work that I am being called to do with you.

The work we are doing is not easy and we will face resistance. Even so, we are creators, with God, of a new song.

*MMS: Thank you, Ray. The providential symmetry is so vivid in how you got here. Just as you were discerning the connections between music and social Justice, we were, too. Together we discerned about the important role of music in the work of liberation, and some things unraveled to make room for something new. And it is important to notice that the thing that was so off putting to someone is exactly what we need. There is a Mutuality of your growth and ours and what we are ready for now. Things came together—the unraveling on both ends, the frayed threads are the “even so” that God used to weave our lives together.*

*Amy Kim came to GCPC during another time of unraveling and immense transformation—COVID. Every year has been a new experience of who this place—again, God’s capacity to create, to transform, to liberate out of the unraveling is something worth savoring.*

### Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks

Even so, mutual liberation is still the goal.

Last week I had the privilege of visiting my hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah while visiting my parents, our daughter and some other family and friends. As I have shared with you all before, growing up there had lots of challenges and wonderful and holy moments.

After our first child, Natalily was born we returned there for 13 years before moving to Shaker Heights, Ohio and now here.

I don’t know about you but any time I go back to visit it's like there is a time warp as I make my way through the threshold of my parents’ house. I am no longer 46, I am 12. Life is both in slow motion and fast forward. I have noticed the past few times I have been there that I get quieter, more reflective, more aware of the distance between what was and what is. This has generated so many feelings to sort through but mostly a lot of confirmation of who I was, who I am and who I have always been.

The first time I remember feeling othered was in Kindergarten when my teacher Mrs. Newbold pointed out that I had olive skin to a room full of all white-except for me 5 year

olds - who promptly started to giggle upon the thought of my skin being olive. What she said was true and while I love my olive skin, I didn't understand what was funny or why I wanted to hide. At the age of 5 I was learning about how getting smaller felt like protection and how even though I belonged there, I still questioned if I could be there- Me- who I understood myself to be and all the things I was trying on, as 5 year olds do. I was experiencing imposter syndrome at 5.

As I continued in that Elementary School with the knowledge of the other kids of color- Tommy, Ian, Tara and my older sister. Then Middle and High School where there were more kids who were not white which also meant that while we were all at the same school the actual integration was few and far between. I learned about white passing (though I only in the last 10 years knew what it was and how I was able to utilize that in moments where I simply wanted to 'fit in". I started to recognize that there were limits to how I would be seen by most people - not all, but most. I was not part of the dominant faith, I was not in the majority so while my presence was ok, I learned that I would not get voted to be a part of leadership that I really wanted to be a part of and upon reflection was a clear nudge toward my calling and vocation.

Our church was so good to me and yet they also did not understand the racialized ways the church has been formed and our ethnicity was a data point on a yearly census done by the national church.

Fast forward... Thanks to the thousands of ways Spirit is so faithful, I am here, I am confident of my call to ministry. I have been in this vocation for over 25 years now. I have had so many opportunities to lead and serve in all the communities we have lived at the congregational level and nationally as a card carrying Presbyterian nerd.

When our kids were 1 and 4 years old we moved to Kentucky and I was able to attend seminary briefly in the midst of a very full life with two young children, a spouse who worked full time and all that brings. In that first year it became clear that what was required of me and how that would limit how I wanted to be a mom given where our family was at the time were not cohesive so I returned to congregational youth ministry. I will never regret this decision... both to start seminary and to eventually leave. Most of my on-campus counterparts were white cis men and women whose life did not resemble ours. The community was welcoming and tried to be present for us, the challenges we were facing again reinforced a sense of imposter syndrome and my navigation of how or if space for me in ordained pastoral leadership was possible.

In the years to follow I would be reminded over and over again that I had a place in ministry. I am still in awe of the horrible and holy moments I have the honor and trust to be a part of.

The expansiveness of the queer, bipoc siblings I am in deep relationship with and have served alongside in this denomination has been an embodiment of what I searched for early on in life. A WE- a sense of being a part of something bigger, worth all the energy and space to be Me. These folks along with white folx-clearly there have been some amazing white folx along the way, and now that keeps me tethered to this historically white denomination.

This sense of WE has also prompted the Session of Grace Covenant and myself to enter into a process of holy imagination around an alternative path to ordination. In the last 6 years the denomination has changed language in our constitution to allow presbyteries (our regional governing collective of churches) to be more adaptive in how folx in the midst of confirming and preparing for a call to ordained ministry are allowed to be validated and approved for ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in our denomination. Spoiler alert, we have been having these conversations for almost two years now because white systems and imagination or untraditional paths are anomalies and very difficult to interrupt. My reflex toward imposter syndrome can get so overwhelming in these meetings. The Session of Grace Covenant along with all of you have clearly been affirming and so honoring of my call and I do believe you consider me as one of your pastors. And yet, until the system gives me approval I am limited in my role, my title and limited in being in full alignment with who I know myself to be.

I have faith that Spirit is moving BUT...we are still a church full of people who are so entrenched in misunderstanding of how creating an alternate path is not taking anything away from those who have walked a traditional path. WE are entrenched in over analyzing instead of breathing, listening and following the lead of the Spirit over the letter of the "law".

Even so, we- that Divine, Holy WE, you and me- all of us are in it. We are still moving toward mutual liberation for ALL OF US.

I have always been somewhere in-between here and now... being 12 years old, wondering where I fit in, the confidence of my call and the learned reflex to get small and quiet and make sure I don't take up too much space.

I have learned to expect resistance but to never stop expecting God to be present in the resistance and the Spirits ability to break through.

I am not willing to compromise who I am called to be or to deny any part of me that God created. I am a child of the divine WE who has drawn me into communities of HOLY WE that continue to challenge me to keep imagining and understanding that with all that WE are up against there is space for us to be better and do better by one another- liberation for all of us.

I am learning that WE need to prioritize the Liberation of all. We have spent too much time on pet projects that prioritize the liberation of one marginalized group while unintentionally further marginalizing another. As a multi-racial human that has the ability to be more white passing than some it can be difficult to locate myself in the midst of racial dialogue and honor the need for my liberation in parallel to those with darker skin from me or those with more traumatic paths than mine. Our culture has a thing with oppression olympics and no one ever wins in these events so we need to steer away from creating a hierarchy of liberation.

When I was in Utah, I starting reading this book. I am not quite through half because I need to take it all in when I am with it. This book has been a bit of a love letter from God in this time and place written so clearly for me. I am going to share the letter she writes to brown girls reading this book.

AKKP reads from book

Grace Covenant, let's keep forging new paths together, interdependent space where the Divine and Holy WE is all about prioritizing Liberation for all of us and the recognition that God is in this. And Even so, WE will labor together toward this goal.

*Transition to Marcia (AKKP)*

*Thank you, Amy Kim. Our interdependence is both our greatest gift and our deepest challenge. The Holy We is something we are discovering together.*

*We live in a world that gives us plenty of reasons to give up on things ever changing or people ever being trustworthy. We live in a country where it can feel like the forces of oppression and systems of disadvantage are retooling and retrenching. Even so, we, Grace Covenant, are daring to believe in a better world, in healing being possible for the human family, for transformation to be something that is happening right here, right now.*

*Even so can go both ways you know. That is, the even so can be even when the conditions are ripe for transformation and healing, we can get stuck in our old habits, we can be paralyzed or activated by our trauma, by our past, that it makes it hard to be present to the possibility that something is different, that something really might change.*

*And even when there are amazing things happening, there can be really hard things happening at the same time. Healing can hurt, transformation can be terrifying, growing can carry pain with it—sometimes pain that can feel like too much to bear.*

*Church and ministry is in my DNA, even so, I walked away, I resisted. One of the big reasons I resisted trusting church and still do sometimes today is that the church is one of the reasons I felt so isolated as a teenager in an abusive, dangerous relationship. It is withering for your community to watch you be threatened and no one do anything about it.*

*The church can be a powerful gaslighter—it must be my fault that these bad things are happening to me. Shame and self-blame were paralyzing for me. So, I looked to the church and scripture for a way to redeem myself. Instead of asking for support or telling the truth, I kept secrets and told everyone I was fine. And that was actually a pretty wise strategy on my part—because the church wouldn't have been a good support. My body knew what it was doing—and I survived.*

*So, the fact that I am in ministry has been a hard road and sometimes I wonder why I do something that makes me circle back through the trauma of being betrayed, of broken trust, and normalized bullying behavior and dangerous boundary crossings. Every church I have served has been a part of my healing journey—each in their own way. Some in ways that almost broke me—like sexual harassment by the Head of Staff when I was an associate pastor.*

*Coming to GCPC was me trusting God saying to me—not in a whisper but in a very unrelenting way, “it's worth trying again, it's worth trusting again.” And so, I took a leap of faith to be here. And I realize more and more how all the healing work I did before I got here prepared me for the journey the Spirit has us on together.*

*Even with the things about pastoring that hurt, that betray, that are deeply disappointing—even so, this church is one of the biggest blessings of my 54 years of life. I never could have imagined a church like this—over time, practicing what healing and liberation can feel like and look like when we put those things at the center of our purpose as a community.*

*This is the first church I have served where I have no reservations about inviting someone to come and see—that's how I know that the trust I have cultivated in you, in us, is deep for me. And it answers the hurt of my past, the shame, the gaslighting—it matches it all not by erasing it, but by giving my body some new visceral data.*

*What's do the “even so's” feel like for you? Our noticing, our practicing, our letting this new visceral data sink in, our sharing our “even so” stories is what makes it work.*

*We are reclaiming and decolonizing the practice of testimony. Testimony is not about your salvation, it's about our liberation. The more we share stories, the true stories of who we are and where we've been and the even so's—the more open and ready we will become for Grace Covenant's story to come to life.*



*Now I know church can feel like this, too. Not just that—but also this. Even with all of that, I rejoice in the beauty of what we are becoming. Even so, we are here together and it's the even so's that makes the together such a marvelous and wondrous thing to behold.*

*Thanks be to God.*