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There's a question I'd like you to hold on to this morning. We're going to come back to it a few times and look at a few different ways to answer it. The question is this: what does a life lived in response to God's covenant love look like? Hold on to that question, because we'll return to it more than once.

In the preface to one of his hymn books, John Wesley wrote, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection." That idea has become bedrock in what it means to be a Methodist today — the idea that religion cannot exist as some solitary thing. You or I could not lock ourselves away in a room and be fulfilled in religion, because religion requires social connection. Religion is something that has to be done in community.

The same is true of holiness. Last week we talked about the personal aspect of holiness. This week we come to learn that holiness only has value when it is lived socially — that if all we ever do is work on personal holiness, we will have missed the great aspect of holiness that is lived in community.

So what did this look like for Wesley and those early Methodists in the 1700s? The social aspect of religion looked like forming intentional communities called classes and bands, where Methodists engaged their faith as a community rather than as individuals. Yes, they still went to church like we do today. They still sat and listened to the pastor prattle on for an hour. But then they started meeting together outside of worship time — in class meetings and band meetings — where they grew their faith as part of a community. Church wasn't something that was done *to* them; it became part of what they did *together*.

The social aspect of faith also looked like those communities visiting the sick and the imprisoned. It looked like supporting the poor. It looked like providing education at a time when education was not available to everyone — when only the wealthy could afford to be educated, those early Methodist communities made it part of their work to teach. It looked like providing health care, again at a time when health care was accessible only to the wealthy. One of John Wesley's most popular books was, quite literally, a book of home remedies that people could use to heal their families. They didn't always work — the one for baldness never worked for me — but they reflected a belief that everyone should have access to health care in whatever form could be provided.

Those early Methodists lived their faith *in* their community rather than simply meeting together to talk about it. That is what we mean when we talk about social holiness.

Wesley's words bear repeating: the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness; faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. We United Methodists have shortened that to say there is no religion but social religion, and no holiness but social holiness. It sounds like one of our good church slogans, but it is more than a slogan we trot out. It is the core of our identity as a United Methodist church. It is our confession that the work God begins in the heart of a believer is never meant to stay there. It is never meant to take up residence in the single believer alone. It is always meant to go out into the world — to serve, to be social.

The prophet Micah, as Florabeth shared with us, invites us to witness a trial — words many of us know by heart. This is the story of God calling Israel into court to answer for violating the covenant. God calls witnesses; God calls the mountains and the hills to bear witness to Israel's unfaithfulness. God builds the case against Israel, the ways they have broken covenant. God comes as the accuser, and yet — in words that are absolutely beautiful — God's language is never angry or accusatory. Instead, God's words are filled with grief. *What have I done to you?* God asks.

God invites Israel to remember — to remember all the ways God has been faithful to the covenant of love. *I brought you out of Egypt, God says. I redeemed you from the house of slavery. I sent before you Moses and Aaron and Miriam.* Rather than bring accusation or anger, God reminds the people that they have been loved. It is a very different court experience than Israel would have expected — not designed for retribution or punishment, but designed to call the people back into love of God and neighbor.

And so the question returns: what does a life lived in response to God's covenant love look like? Israel offers several answers, and at first, all of them are wrong. Does it look like bowing down, prostrating ourselves before God? No, it does not. Does it look like coming to the altar with burnt offerings? No, it does not. Does it look like bringing God thousand-day-old calves for sacrifice? No, it does not. Does it look like thousands of rams, or rivers of oil poured out to God? No, it does not. Does it look like human sacrifice — giving up the firstborn as payment for sin? No, it does not.

Over and over again, the answer is no. Over and over again, we learn that God is not pleased by such gifts. Perhaps the reason is that they are transactional at their core — they come from a belief that God's love is something to be purchased with our tithes and our sacrifices. Again and again we are told that is not how God works. God does not love us in response to our ability to give to God. In Micah, God reveals that God has no interest in a transactional relationship with us. Instead, God desires that our lives be shaped by justice, mercy, and humility. God wants those qualities to become our lived response to God's love for us.

The answer to the question — what does a life lived in response to God's covenant love look like — is found in verse 8. It looks like doing justice. It looks like embracing faithful love. It looks like humbly walking with God. My study Bible includes a comment on this passage that I had never noticed before reading it this past week: in a single sentence, the prophet sums up a century of brilliant prophecy. Micah answers the question of what life looks like, lived in response to God's love, and it looks like justice, mercy, and humility. The pattern becomes clear — holiness is not about doing more. Holiness is about being so caught up in the love of God that we can do nothing apart from it.

The epistle of James, which Florbeth also shared with us, offers a similar answer. James is one of the more controversial letters in the New Testament — so much so that the reformer Martin Luther called it an "epistle of straw" and wanted it removed from the Bible altogether. I've heard he even tore it out of his own personal Bible; he did not care much for James. And yet for Methodists, James's letter might be one of the most important in our tradition.

The controversy stems from the fact that James seems to directly contradict what Paul has been teaching elsewhere — that salvation comes through faith alone, by God's grace. James, instead, teaches that faith divorced from good works is dead; that there is no point to faith if it doesn't spur us on toward goodness. That idea sits at the very core of Wesley's thought on holiness: that the greatest inner faithfulness is worthless if it does not lead to a transformed life. So if Micah answers the question of what it looks like to live in response to God's covenant love one way, James answers it in a similar key: it looks like faith made visible in the world through serving others as God has served us — clothing, sheltering, feeding, and loving where the world has come up short.

I titled this worship series *Made for More*, and I think it's important to talk about what that "more" actually is — because I don't know about anyone else, but I get tempted to chase the wrong kind of more. I hear "more" and I think I need to spend more time, more energy, more money. I need to do more, add more responsibilities, more burdens, more expectations — as if enough "more" added to my life will finally make me feel fulfilled. I keep thinking more equals better: more busyness, more planning, more energy spent. Maybe the word "more" carries too much baggage. For some of us, hearing that we are made for more sounds like a burden — like one more thing on a pile that's already too high.

What if, instead of thinking of "more" as something to be added on, more is actually a deeper engagement with the world that God loves? Many of us know the Hebrew word *shalom*, which we usually translate as "peace." The Reverend Dr. Randy Woodley offers a deeper understanding of shalom — more than a fleeting feeling of peace, he describes it as practical love expressed through the structures and systems of the world. In other words,

shalom carries the weight of God's love seeking the good of whole communities, not just individuals. It is how God's love goes deeper into our communities. So maybe "more" has to do with engaging that vision of shalom — a deeper love experienced together.

Our "more" always needs to be focused on the real, practical ways we love one another with the whole of who we are. So when we hear that we are made for more, I want us to hear that we are made for real, practical ways of loving one another. There's a line from Henri Nouwen that I think gets to the heart of it: *Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and in the life to come.*

Maybe Nouwen would answer the question of how we live in response to God's covenant love in just that way — by offering peace, by bringing a smile, by saying words of healing, by letting go of anger, by forgiving, by loving. Maybe these are the ways we are invited into "more." Not to add more, not to be burdened by more, but to go deeper into the love of God by experiencing God's shalom in our communities and in our lives. We are made for this kind of more.

Let us pray.

Holy One, you have gifted us in many ways. Teach us to go deep. Teach us to receive your love and to take it with us, that in the ways we go into the world, we may love one another as you have loved us. In Christ I pray. Amen.