

Welcome

Good morning! I am Debbie Reese-etc.

I'm a high school teacher to students that want to be teachers (it is a pretty great job). Every year my students participate in a national student organization competition and I make them dress according to a dress code. They have to wear a school logo button up shirt, black dress pants and black dress shoes.

And to be clear: these are not the competition's rules. They're *mine*. This is Mrs. Reese' dress code. My students hate it.

Dress code rules! Did you have these when you were in school or currently at school or your workplace? Everyone hates them right? Or at least the ones that have to follow them do.

A few years ago my competition dress code did not exist. I just asked my students to dress in professional dress, and they all followed suit. But one day of injustice to my students changed all of that. We had advanced to the state competition and several students from not just my high school, but two others from my district had won top awards at the state level - this is an incredible feat to accomplish.

While these young ladies were in line to walk across the stage an adult in charge stopped them and told them they were unable to walk because they didn't meet their state organization dress codes standards; one dress was not far enough down the young ladies calves, another dress was too tight, a young lady's shoulders could be seen with her cut out arms and another young lady's pants were too short TOO SHORT. All of the students looked professional, but another adult was going to decide that the lengths of their professional dress was not meeting their dress code standards.

My students called me from behind stage crying that they were not able to walk across and receive their award. They were devastated they couldn't walk to receive the award for the projects they had worked eight months on. Mrs. Reese suddenly became Mamma Bear Reese. No one was going to take away from our students what they had earned because of another person's personal opinion.

My teacher and momma bear brain went into full effect to come up with a plan that our students would walk across the stage! Those students along with the others that were not receiving awards that day ran into the restroom, hiding behind the stalls and clothes were being thrown over and under stall doors! We were sharing our dresses, skirts, shirts and even my own pants ended up on a student and I had her "too short" skirt on!

Why? Why did I do this? Why did I jump into a bathroom stall and exchange my pants for a skirt with a student (poor kid can you imagine having to do that with one of your high school teachers)?

It was love! I wasn't in a position to change the dress code. And I wasn't in charge of interpreting the vague standards - what counts as too tight or too short?

But I wasn't going to do nothing. Because I love my students. And that day, my love could be measured. In skirts and pants.

Ever since that fateful weekend, I've implemented Mrs. Reese' Dress Code. Why? Because I love them. My dress code is a public expression of my love for my students. I will never let another student feel the way my former students felt every again!

I share that story because we know that sometimes love requires us to step up, to step out of our comfort zone. I want to ask the question today: "What does love look like IN PUBLIC?"

Real Love is measurable and tangible. Real love makes a difference. You can see it "in public". That's something we believe here at Catalyst because we see it in Jesus' love for us. God's love for us changes the world. Changes our world. So let's begin this morning by singing about this love that makes a difference, God's love for us.

Message

Welcome to Journey to Love. We're in a 40-day experience that lies at the very core of our human existence. For the last couple of months, we've gathered here in this group and also in our small groups to answer together some of the most basic questions we ask as humans: How do we love well? And How do we receive love well?

We began with our friend Matt Mikalatos, the author of the book we're using as a guide in our journey. Matt invited us to prepare to set out. He invited us simply to 'show up', to agree to participate in this journey. We saw how to spot love, and also how to spot what love is not. Last week, we explored what it means to say that God is the source of love in our lives and the world.

Today, I want to ask the question, "Does Love Change the World? What does love look like in public?"

Does this mean big grand gestures? Does this mean you have to fight wars, conquer illness, jump leaps and bounds, wear a cape or start in a superhero movie? Well of course not! Did I change the world by giving one of those kids my pants? Yes, I did change those students' world. I changed it for those young ladies that had worked so hard for months and was having something taken.

No, it is in the small things that we do. Will there be a movie made about my pants-nope-no special effects or a cap worn, but it was a small gesture that changed the world and my students will never forget it.

Cornel West said. "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."

Biblical Justice is when no one gets left out. We care for the vulnerable. It is not about you, it is about showing love for the other person. What we are talking about is what love looks like in public; we are talking about justice.

When we think about justice, we imagine - probably - our justice system. Lady Justice wearing a blindfold and holding scales. Our idea of justice is keeping everything balanced. If you do wrong, you're punished. If you do right, you're rewarded. Everyone gets what they deserve.

What is the difference between Biblical Justice and Our Justice system? Biblical Justice is when everyone gets what they need (no one gets left out). That's why Dr. West says love in public is justice. Love isn't concerned with *deserve*. How many of us give our kids what they *deserve*? Hopefully none of us. Hopefully we give our kids what they need to become whole, healthy adults, regardless of how they act.

What does love look like with other people-not in our houses, not in our relationships or with our families or loved ones? This is the question that drives us to love others, love the outsiders like insiders. Love in public. Love that engages the world and changes the world.

Turn with us to Amos 5.

Amos is one of the first of Israel's prophets. The prophets were an institution that arose in Israel as a response to the monarchy. As Israel transitioned from a loose confederation of tribes to a nation with a centralized government something else developed, something God had warned them against:

They developed a hierarchy. Their society became stratified - divided into haves and have nots. The prophets arose as a way for God's voice to continue to be heard. They

prophets weren't part of the palace OR the temple (usually). They were sort of like independent investigators, critiquing both the king and the priests from the outside.

In Amos' day, things were bad. Those in power, those with wealth and privilege, were exploiting those with less. A lot of the most vulnerable people in Israel were not getting what they needed to flourish. We can tell from the way he condemns how Israel was living. Let's listen to his words:

How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent. Therefore, though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them. Though you plant lush vineyards, you will never drink wine from them. For I know the vast number of your sins and the depth of your rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. -- Amos 5:10-12

A couple of things to note here. First, the problems here are systemic. It's in the legal system and the economics. It's both individual *and* cultural.

And the bigger issue is that the Israelites didn't see anything wrong with how they were living. They were still going to the Temple, singing psalms and offering sacrifices, then turning around and exploiting and oppressing their neighbors.

The Israelites understood faith only as vertical. As long as they worshipped God, they could live however they wanted. Amos was one of the first prophets to challenge this idea, to insist that our love of God should spill out into the world around us. Our love should be horizontal as well as vertical.

No wonder, then, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream Speech" on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he quoted these words we're about to read. Dr. King saw the same problems in our world: a lot of people love to worship God, but it doesn't change the world around us. Our love for God doesn't spill over to how we treat our neighbors.

Let's read what Amos had to say about that:

"I hate all your show and pretense— the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living. -- Amos 5:21-24

Wow. Can you imagine God coming to us right now and saying, “Quit singing all those songs. You sound like a bunch of meowling cats. And enough with the sermons. Yap, yap, yap. Just a bunch of empty words. And your prayers? A joke. Give me a break.

Harsh, right?

Why would God say something like that?

Because Amos is making the strong point that unless our love is horizontal, it’s not really vertical. We can’t love GOD if we’re not loving the people made in God’s image.

Like Israel, we want to imagine faith is primarily a vertical, private thing. Just between me and Jesus. Maybe me, Jesus and my church.

But Amos insists faith has to be public or it’s not faith. After all, justice is what love looks like in public, remember?

Some of us are really uncomfortable that love is public and not all private. We don’t like it because we don’t want to show it to other people and be vulnerable, we don’t want to show justice to others for fear of what others might think. And, frankly, we’ve known too many Christians who have forced their beliefs on other people.

But for people who follow Jesus, love has to be public. We must be a justice people.

Turn with us to Mark 12.

This is the story where a lawyer asks Jesus what the Greatest Commandment is. His question is a way of saying, “Look, there are lots of laws. Is there one that is the most important, one that tells us how to interpret all the others?”

Jesus draws on the tradition that goes back to Amos, insisting that love is what matters most - vertical and horizontal love. Worship and justice, two sides to every coin. Let’s read. I’ll be using the First Nations Version:

One of the scroll keepers overheard Creator Sets Free (Jesus) opposing the Upright Ones. When he heard the good answer he had given, he asked him, “Which instruction in our tribal law stands first?”

“The first and greatest instruction is this,” Creator Sets Free (Jesus) answered. “Hear me, O tribes of Wrestles with Creator (Israel), there is only one Great Spirit and Maker

of us all. You must love the Great Spirit with your whole being—with the strength of your arms, the thoughts of your mind, and the courage of your heart.’

“The second instruction is like the first,” he added. “You must love your fellow human beings in the same way you love yourselves. There is no other instruction greater than these.” -- Mark 12:28-31 (FNV)

You can’t separate loving God from loving our neighbors. Worship and Justice go hand in hand. Love, if it’s really love, changes the world.

Let me give you an example of what love looks like in public-it is a story from Matt and his daughter and her high school and we all know my view on dress code.

Read Matt’s story- pages 129-132

My dress code is set up the way it is for a reason. Do the students like it? No. Do they understand it, no. Why did I share my pants with another student? I couldn’t change it so I loved others. I made my love public, I showed others what love looks like.

I love my students and because I love my students I know that they will have to face more hardships than they know they are going to know they are going to go through. What do I do in order to make sure I prepare them for that and make the world more like the place I wish it was for them. Like I do for my son-I vote on issues that are in favor of my students, that looks like the world we are now living in and what the future holds.

Love is public. When we love we have to change the world for the sake of others that we love.

Talking about politics is hard for people and makes us uncomfortable. What really helped me was what Matt said in this chapter.

“Love wants to change the world, and the reason love is so focused on this revolutionary ideal is that when we are loving the people around us, we see ways in which the world is not what it could be for people we love. We want it to be better. More accessible. More just. More loving.

This doesn't mean you have to run for office if you love people. But it should mean that our political decisions-in whatever government we live under - should be informed by our love for other people. And think ”government” in the broadest sense: the people who are in charge. There are politics and “governments” at our workplaces, our schools, our religious institutions , our clubs and sports teams and online hangouts.” -- Matt Mikalatos, *Journey to Love*

Friends, I know we are afraid to talk about love in public. Justice is a thorny issue. Politics are a thorny issue. But here Jesus and Amos and all of God's prophets have given us a clear guide: Is my position, my policy, my behavior truly concerned with what's going to help my neighbor flourish?

This love might make you do crazy things - like trading your teacher pants for a high school kid's skirt. But it's this love that changes our world. We know because that's the love God showed us!

Communion and Examen

The communion table invites us into that public space where Jesus demonstrated his love for us. We don't serve a God who sits distant in Heaven and tells us to love each other. God became one of us and showed us up close and personal what love looks like in public. Jesus gave his own life up to transform us and to change our world.

So we too come to the communion table together so we can receive this tangible expression of Jesus' love for us.

Before we come to the table, I want to invite you into a time of prayer with me. I'm going to give you some questions to sit with, to reflect and pray with.

Then I'll pray for us all and we can receive communion together!

When in the last week has my love been vertical, oriented toward God?

When have I failed to show love to my neighbor?

How can I show love to my neighbor this week?

How can I show love for God this week?

Let's pray together:

God, you have gathered us today that we might remember that your love is powerful. Your love changes us, and changes our world. We confess that too often we forget that your love for us should spill over to the world around us. Too often we are like our spiritual parents, who worshiped you but did not love their neighbors. We have heard, from your prophet Amos and your own son, Jesus, that when we do not love those you made in your image, we do not love you.

We confess we have too often failed to love well. So we come to your table today and bring with us our failures, our fears and anxieties about loving our world well. We offer them to you and in exchange receive these elements. We pray they become a spiritual food for us, that in receiving them, we would know your love more fully. May that love spill over our lives and into all who meet us.

We offer these prayers and approach your table today in the name of your son, Jesus.

The night Jesus was betrayed, he shared a meal with his followers. During the meal, he broke bread and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, broken for you.”

When the meal was over, he gave them a cup of wine, saying, “This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it all.”

So now, we too eat and drink, and as we do, we remember Jesus’ death until he returns.

Assignment and Closing

Thank givers

Thank people serving

Then:

As a teacher you know I have to give homework and our friend Matt has given us a reflection and an exercise at the end of every chapter! I love Matt!!

The Exercise on page 142

Make a list of the people you love in life. How have they changed you for the better? For extra credit, send them a little note and tell them about it.

Small steps, one person, one act, one gesture at a time can change the world with love.
“Love the transformed heart”

And for those of you that loved an extra credit assignment.

On page 135-Next time you see someone getting dragged on social media, the news, in your workplace, the internet, your neighbors or friend group, reach out to them and remind them they are a human being who is worthy of love.

If you can believe this, teachers and educators are having a really hard time right now and are being dragged into the media and social circles. I have someone I work with that I felt needed to hear they are loved, they are worthy, they are a human being that is more than their job and is doing a great job even if they are not being “told” they are. I wrote them a note, put a sticky note on page 135 to show them compassion and gave them this book! You of course don't have to be this extreme (it is the star student/teacher in me) but I am excited to see where this leads and even if I never hear back I was able to love in semi public/private to another educator and how great they are.

Now, as you're going: Catalyst, you have been loved by the one who made you and knows you and calls you. If you will receive God's love for you, it spills over to everyone you meet. May you go this week with God's love all around you. And may you be a source of that love for every person you encounter.

Go in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!