Claire Brown & Anita Peebles

NEW Directions *for* HOLY Questions

Progressive Christian Theology for Families

~9~

Where Is God When Bad Things Happen?



Once upon a time there was a man named Job, who was kind and loving, who worked hard and cared for his community and family. Terrible things began to happen to him, things that no one should ever experience. Storms with lightning burned up his farm. Bad guys took his farm animals. Job's friends, workers, and children were hurt and even died in terrible accidents. Job became very sick: he had sores on his skin, and his body hurt all over. He asked God for help in prayer. When other people tried to understand why these bad things had happened, they told him terrible, hurtful ideas. Job's friends told him that he must have done something wrong to deserve all these bad things.

Finally, Job and God had a conversation, and God explained a strange answer for why bad things happen: there is not always a good answer. Job asked God to explain where God had been and why God hadn't protected him. But instead of talking about the hard things Job experienced, God told him all about the strange creatures, the beautiful earth, the powerful sea that God created. God talked about God's wisdom, about everything strange and beautiful that is beyond human beings' ability to know. Job remembered that some hard questions don't have a clear answer, but no matter what happens he could trust that God was there. (Retold from the Book of Job)

Spiritual Practice: **Sometimes we have hard days, and sometimes terrible things happen in our lives. Has anything hard or terrible ever happened to**

you? What happened? Put one hand on your belly and one hand on your heart. Take three big deep breaths. After you breathe in, say, "I am right here." After you breathe out, say, "I am right now."

Sometimes it is easy to talk about hard or scary times. Sometimes it is hard to talk about them. Everyone, at some point in their lives, feels frightened or hurt or lonely.

Spiritual Practice: **If it's not easy for you to talk or think about your hard time today, you might like to take some time to make art. The art doesn't have to be a picture of the hard time. Sometimes creating pictures, shapes, or colors is just very good for our mind, feelings, and bodies, especially when we have been through something tough.**

The story about Job in the Bible is strange and simple at the same time. It is an unusual kind of story in the Bible, because it is a sort of myth or legend that people would tell to explain where God is when bad things happen.

It seems surprising that all these bad things happened to someone at the same time, but we might know the feeling of when bad things just keep adding up. When we read about Job's friends, it might seem obvious that they were saying some really unhelpful things, but we have probably had the feeling of someone trying to be kind and actually saying something unkind. We may have even been the person who accidentally said a hurtful thing!



What would you like someone to say or do for you if you were going through a hard time or feeling sad?

Even when we are being well cared for, when people show and speak love to us, hard and painful things are still hard and painful! We might wonder: Why is this happening to me? What is the point of this? Will things be okay again someday? Maybe like Job, who experienced some very hard times, we find ourselves wondering: Where is God? Can God fix this bad thing?



One of the most important things that we know about God and hard things is this: God never makes bad things happen to us or to anyone else. Hard and hurting times are not a test or punishment, no matter what. The Bible says that "every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all" (James 1:17, Common English Bible). God is the cause and giver of good things, not bad. We can trust God's character, God's personality—and, most important, God's values—to be consistent with goodness, not badness.

Some bad things happen because of the patterns of nature. Things like earthquakes, fierce animals hurting people, even sickness can be hard and terrible, but we are part of a larger natural world in which the earth and other creatures are also trying to live and flourish. Those land shifts, animals in self-protection, and microbes can cause humans harm just by doing what they are supposed to do.

Some bad things happen because people make mistakes. Breaking a bone while playing outside, car crashes, missing a party or an important appointment—all happen and for no reason other than no one's body or mind is perfect. We aren't superheroes, and people make mistakes.

Some bad things happen because people make terrible choices. War, the ways that the earth and climate are changing and hurting, and people not having a safe place to live or enough food to eat—all happen because human beings choose their own power and comfort over the well-being of all persons and the natural world.

In all these different kinds of bad things, it is okay to be angry and sad. It is okay to be scared. It is fantastic if you think about these bad things and decide you want to get to work at changing them!

A very important thing for us to know and remember is that God is always with us, even in hard times. The apostle Paul, who experienced many difficult times in his life, wrote:

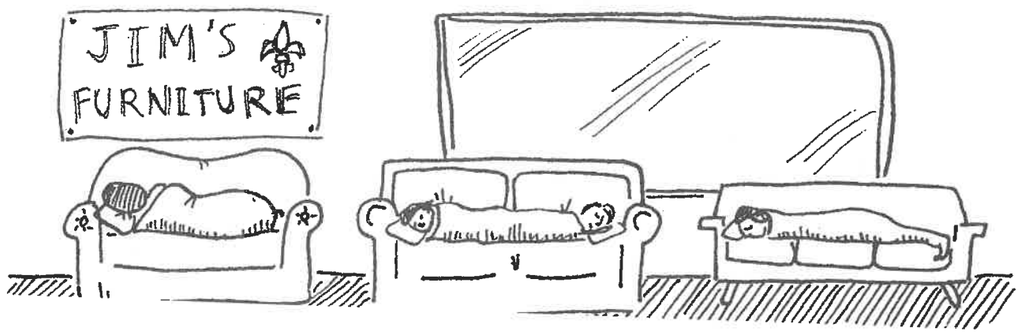
I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord, not death or life, not angels nor rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created. (Romans 8:38, Common English Bible)

No matter what happens, God's love is always with us.

Spiritual Practice: **Fill in the blanks with your own examples. "Nothing can separate me from God's love. Not _____ or _____ or _____."**

One way that we remember that God's love is with us is by experiencing love and care from our communities during a hard time. Not everyone says silly things like Job's friends! In fact, most of the time people are very loving and helpful.





Justice Story~ ***In 2017 a very strong storm, Hurricane Harvey, came to Texas, and many people in Houston lost their homes or had to leave them for a time until the winds stopped blowing and the flood waters went down. It is a frightening thing to experience a hurricane. One man, Jim McIngvale, wanted to help his friends and neighbors. Jim owned a store that sold furniture, called Gallery Furniture. He used his furniture delivery trucks to give people a ride to safety. If people needed a safe place to stay and rest, he hosted them at the furniture store, where there were plenty of comfortable couches and chairs and cozy beds. Jim saw a need in his community, as people were having a very hard time, and thought about how he might have something to help. He showed loving presence in a practical way to so many neighbors and community members. God's love for Houston was shown through Jim's love. God was in Jim.*** ~

When we remember stories like this, stories of people helping, caring, and working together to support those in need or harm, we can see God's love everywhere, even in the toughest and saddest times.

Whose love and care remind you that God's love is here? To whom do you show God's love?

God's Spirit and love are always with you, no matter what happens in your life or in the world. You can find God's presence in loving and kind people around you. You can find God when you pray or take deep, calming breaths. You can find God when you read or listen to stories of how God always takes care of people and how people take care of each other.

Spiritual Practice: **After you finish reading this chapter, find someone you love and trust and give them a big hug or a hand squeeze to remind yourself and them that we are not alone.**

For younger children

SAY: God is with us, no matter what. When bad things happen, we feel God's love through other people showing love and kindness to us.

DO: Ask, "When have you had a hard time? What happened?"

PRAY: God, thank you for loving me when things are hard or scary. Thank you for never leaving me. Amen.



~14~
What Happens When We Die?

At the end of his life, Moses left the plains of Moab and went up to a high place on Mount Nebo, and God showed him the land. Moses saw far and wide, from Gilead to the Western Sea and the valley of Jericho. God told Moses, "I promised I would grant your descendants a home in this land. Now you see it with your own eyes, but you won't live long enough to cross into it." Then Moses, a devoted servant of God, died there in Moab. His family and community buried him there and mourned him for thirty days. *(Retold from Deuteronomy 34)*

When human bodies stop working, we die. Just like being born, death happens to everyone. When we die, our hearts stop beating and our brain stops making connections and our lungs stop breathing. Our bodies shut down.

Some people live a long, long time and their bodies slow down until eventually they die. Sometimes people get into accidents and are injured in a way that causes the body's systems of nourishment, breath, and connection to stop working earlier. Sometimes people get sick, and an illness makes it hard for their body to heal itself. Sometimes even doctors don't understand why someone's body shuts down.

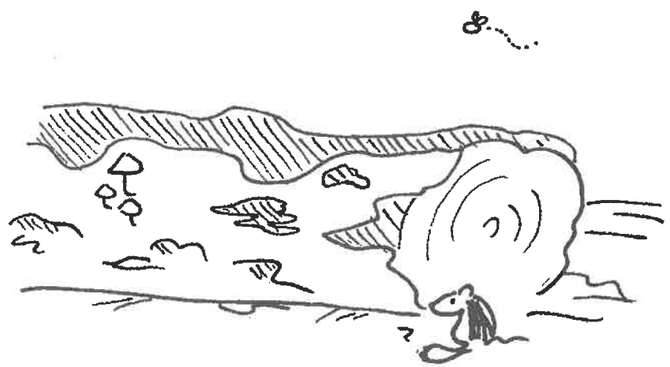
What do you know about death? What questions do you have?
Talk with someone you trust about your questions.

Death is something that happens to our human bodies. But we are more than our bodies, so what happens to our souls, or our spirits or our love? No one knows for sure what happens to our souls when we die. People from all times, places, cultures, and religions have asked this question and have wondered about what happens next. Every religious tradition and every culture across space and time has their own ideas about what happens after death. But only people who have died have experienced what happens after.

The people who wrote the Bible had a lot to say about what happens when we die. Some of the ancient Old Testament writings say that when humans die, they return to the soil from which God created them and their spirit goes back to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Death completes the full circle of life, from God forming humans from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2) to the human body returning to the ground after death.

In the New Testament, the writers of the Epistles (the letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, etc.) tried to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "Whoever believes in me will not die but have life everlasting" (John 11:26). These writers talked about death as something to be defeated. To them, Jesus was the person who showed us how to overcome death by sharing our love with the world.

People who study science also help us understand what happens when we die. Here on earth, we can observe the natural process of death and decay every day. When leaves fall or an animal dies or a tree is cut down, the molecules that make up those things go back into the earth. Those molecules get made into new combinations, so they are not wasted when





something dies. Energy is another thing that is not wasted: it is always coming from someplace and going somewhere. Energy can be transferred from person to person to animal to plant to the ground to the air. Energy cannot be created or destroyed. When someone dies, the energy from their bodies continues forever.

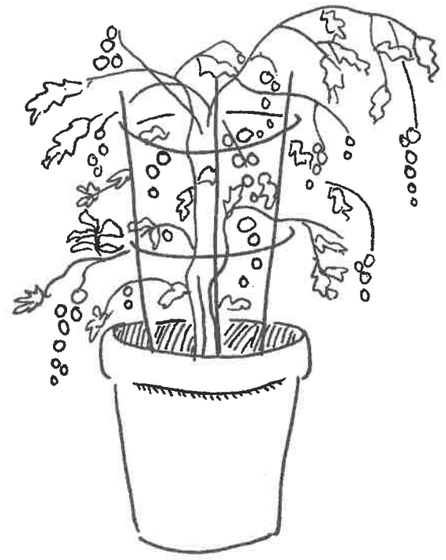
Justice Story ~ ***In Genesis 3:19, God says that humans come from the dust of the ground and will return to the ground when they die. Some groups of people work together to provide space where people's bodies can be buried in environmentally friendly ways, also called "green burial." These places are part of a movement called "conservation burial," where part of the land is a nature-friendly cemetery with no plastics, metals, or concrete used in the burial process. The rest of the land is cared for by local naturalists and conservationists who work to preserve the local species of plants, animals, and insects. Amy Cunningham is a funeral director, a person whose job is to prepare bodies to be buried and work with families whose loved one has died. Amy lives in Brooklyn, New York, and she works with green burial. In this work, Amy brings together her love of people, nature, and the mystery of life and death, and helps people make decisions about their bodies after they die that will honor the earth we live in.*** ~

Spiritual Practice: **Everything in nature, from the molecules that make up our bodies to the energy that makes us live, is recycled. Nothing is ever wasted. Find items around your house that you would normally throw away or recycle. How else could you use the items? Create some art with whatever you have!**

Death can seem like a big mystery. And in some ways, it is! We can't easily observe what happens to a person's soul or spirit. Throughout our lives we learn that there are some things beyond what we can sense and understand, and what happens to our souls when we die might be one of those things.

Some Christians talk about people "going to heaven" after death. That idea doesn't come from the Bible. Even Jesus never talked about "going to heaven." Instead, in the Old Testament, the ancient Hebrew prophets talked about a time when God would come to earth, offering healing to people and to the whole of Creation. During Jesus's lifetime, his followers thought about Jesus as God come to dwell on earth as promised. The "kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of heaven" that Jesus talked about were more about a way of living in harmony with other people and God's Creation instead of a physical place someone will go when they die.

After Jesus's time, the people who wrote the books included in the New Testament looked forward to Jesus returning to earth and making all relationships right with God. One of these books, Revelation, describes a vision of a time when good will be victorious against evil and when God will bring God's kingdom to earth. In Revelation 21:4, the writer says that God "will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more." Much art and music and literature has been inspired by this book of the Bible, some of the ideas and images becoming so popular that people forget Jesus didn't talk about going to heaven after death. Jesus does say that after death, people who do God's will of living with justice and love will be reunited with God (Matthew 25:31–46). He even imagined that God has a big house with so many rooms in it that everyone has a place to live (John 14:2).



What do you imagine heaven could be like?
How do you imagine God's kingdom on earth would feel?
What do you wonder about heaven?

It's okay not to have an answer about what happens to our souls when we die. Or, if we do have an idea of an answer, it's okay not to understand it right away.

Because we do know lots of things about God from the Bible and from our lived experiences. We know that God is with us through Jesus, who is called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). We know that God's love offers comfort even in the most difficult times (Psalm 23). We know that God's love is more powerful and everlasting than anything human or divine (Romans 8:38–39).

Spiritual Practice: **At the dinner table or before you go to bed, light a candle with an adult. If you know someone who has died, say their name and a short prayer: "Loving God, thank you for giving us _____ to know and love." The light of the candle reminds us of that person's love shining in our lives.**



Love does not end when someone dies. You may be reminded of that person's love for you in a bird chirping on a branch or a photo of them or something special they gave you. When you love someone and they die, your love continues, too. You can use your love for that person as you grieve them by doing something that person loved. Some people find it helpful to spend time with others mourning that person. It's healthy to talk about the person who has died, to say their name aloud and remember that person's life.

How do you know that someone loves you, even after they die?
What can you do to remember love after someone dies?

When someone we love dies, our pain is real. Our hearts hurt. They may even feel like breaking. We might not want to do normal things in our everyday lives, because our lives aren't normal anymore. When Moses died, his friends and family and the whole community cried and talked about him and made time to feel sad for a whole month! Even after those 30 days, there were probably moments, even days and weeks, when the people missed Moses terribly. After someone dies, we must learn how to live without that loved one. Living is courageous, especially when we hurt so deeply because we miss someone who is gone.

When a person dies, sometimes people can say things that don't make sense. They might say, "It's all in God's plan" or "They're in a better place" or "They're just sleeping." The people who say these things are trying to offer comfort and show they care, but the words they use can be confusing or upsetting or even just plain wrong. It's important to talk to people we love around us when someone dies, even (and especially) when we are confused about what people are saying.

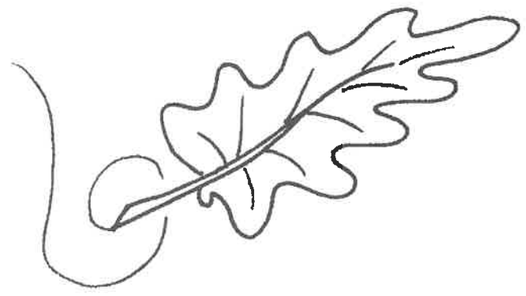
When a life ends, the people who are left behind often will want to remember it in some way. Whether it is a beloved pet or a grandparent or a church member or a friend, marking the memory of someone can be helpful. You can speak someone's name aloud and tell stories about them. You can thank God for giving them to us to know and love, and to love us.

For younger children

SAY: Death is a big mystery. When we die, our bodies stop working and our spirits go with God. It's okay not to understand how that happens. We can trust that God's love is always with us and holding us after we die.

DO: Light a candle and talk about someone you love who has died.

PRAY: Dear God, thank you for love that is even bigger than death. Thank you for always being with me. Amen.



~17~

How Do We Care for Each Other?



One day not long after David became the king of Israel, he was thinking about the family and friends of Saul, the king who had gone before him. David and Saul had been friends, and David had also been good friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. But David and Saul had disagreements. Saul became jealous and was unkind to David, and they became enemies. Even though their friendship had gone wrong, David wondered if there were any of Saul's friends or family members to whom he should show kindness to try and make things right.

David found out about a young man named Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson. Mephibosheth had a physical disability of movement because of an injury to his feet and legs when he was young. In this time and culture where the economy was all about farming, it was difficult for him to earn a living and provide for his family. David visited with Mephibosheth and told him, "I want to give you everything that belonged to your grandfather when he was king so that you can be well and take care of your family. I want to be your friend and share my home and meals with you. I want us to be like family because I loved your father and your grandfather." *(Retold from 2 Samuel 9)*

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, God tells God's people that the two greatest commands, the most important things for them to do, are to love God and love each other. We show our love for God in worship and prayer, and we also love God when we love other people.

Spiritual Practice: **What do you think of when you hear the word "love"? Close your eyes and imagine the face of someone it is easy for you to love, someone who makes you happy. Offer a love prayer for them like this: "May you be healthy; may you be happy; may you know you are loved."**

Then think of someone who isn't hard or easy to love, someone you don't know well.

Offer a love prayer for them, too: "May you be healthy; may you be happy; may you know you are loved."

Now think about someone who is really frustrating or who has been unkind.

Even if this is someone you don't have a good relationship with, or a person it is not safe for you to be with, see whether you can pray for them: "May you be healthy; may you be happy; may you know you are loved."



Finally, imagine your own face. Touch your hands to your cheeks or wrap your arms around yourself in a big hug. Pray for and bless yourself: "May I be healthy; may I be happy; may I know I am loved."

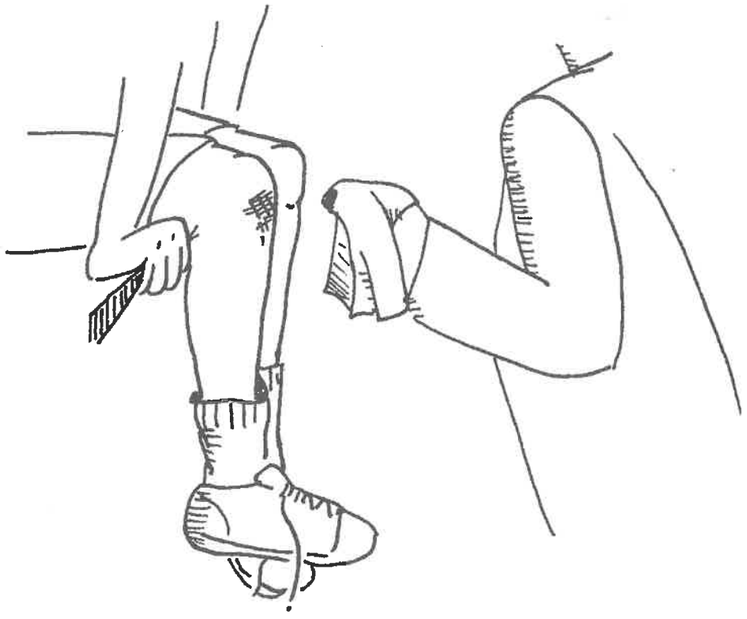
When we love God and love other people, sometimes that love is a good feeling of being connected to each other, feeling happy and liking someone and wanting to be together. But the way God teaches us to love each other is more than just a good feeling. This love is also expressed and experienced by taking care of others, putting that feeling into action, and acting in a loving way even when the feeling isn't there. We start to practice this kind of love when we pray for and send loving attitudes toward others that we really enjoy, those we don't know at all, even people we don't particularly like, and especially toward ourselves. We practice love all around, in hard and easy ways, so that when we don't feel like love, we still know how.

When have you shown love to someone, even when you didn't feel loving?

The Bible tells us over and over, through so many stories and lessons, to love each other. It can be hard work to love all the time, and we need reminders. It can also be tricky to know exactly what love looks like, since making a choice for love can be lots of different things, in different situations, for different people.

In the story of King David and Mephibosheth, David wanted to put his love for Jonathan and Saul into action by doing something good for their relatives. David expressed his love for this family through his words to Mephibosheth, but even more through his actions. He showed welcome, kindness, and respect. He took care of Mephibosheth's physical needs and became his friend.

The Bible and Christian tradition also teach that love is more than the care that we show just one person. God asks us to bring love into every aspect of our life, work, and community. The Old Testament gives many instructions about how to think about caring for other people on a bigger



scale. From how we farm to how we pray, honor Sabbath and rest, welcome strangers, and provide for people who need help, there are many suggestions, guidelines, and stories to show us how. Jesus also cares a lot about making our love bigger for the whole society and told many parables, or wisdom stories, about how we might do that.

One parable, or story, that Jesus told was about a man who owned a farm, who went into town to hire people to work for him. Early in the morning, he hired some workers for a good day's pay. Later in the morning, and then at lunchtime, he went back and hired some more. That afternoon, he decided he needed more help, and even again toward the very end of the workday he still needed more. Each time he went, people were waiting, hoping for a job to come so that they could work to earn money. In the evening, when the work was complete, the farm owner paid every person a full day's wage, no matter how long they worked. When the ones who worked all day long complained, the farm owner said he could be generous if he wanted. This story shows that even people who don't have enough work or fair work should still have their needs met, and that generosity in our money and business is important.

What do you think about that story? Was it fair? Where was love in that story?

The farm owner showed care through his generosity. This care wasn't in the context of a friendship or a personal connection, but about going above and beyond what was necessary and choosing to be good to someone with less power, money, and influence.

This is just one example of how Jesus taught us to practice care and love in our communities. Throughout the stories about Jesus's life, he shows how important it is to show this kind of care to everyone, through kindness, but also through justice. Justice is setting things right in the way our society and world works, so that all people can flourish.

Spiritual Practice: **Take a piece of paper and draw four big circles on it. In the first circle, draw pictures or write the names of people in your family or home that you love. Draw or write how you love them.**

In the second circle, draw pictures or write the names of your friends. Draw or write how you love them.

In the third circle, draw pictures or write the names of people who are in your community, perhaps in your school, church, or neighborhood. Draw or write how you love them.

In the fourth circle, draw pictures or write the names of people (or a description if you don't know a name) who are in your larger community, who you might not know or ever meet. Draw or write how you love them.

Justice Story ~ ***One great example of a place where people are caring for each other with kindness and love but also through justice is an organization called Thistle Farms in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1997, Rev. Becca Stevens opened a home for women to be safe, heal, and grow after they have gone through a particularly hard time, like being in prison, being hurt by a partner or family member, or getting well after having troubles with addiction. After a few years in the home, the women were doing well in their journey to recovery, but they faced challenges with finding jobs and saving money to live well. Becca saw these challenges, so she and the women and some other volunteers began making candles and selling them. Today, Thistle Farms serves many women who are recovering from tough times and who are gaining job skills and financial stability. Their motto is "love heals," and the community offers love, celebration, kindness, and a safe home for the women in the program. But kindness and love need the supportive structures of justice to flourish. Thistle Farms started businesses of a café and store so that the women in the community also have good jobs and can make money. They make soaps, lotions, and candles to sell that are good for bodies and good for the earth. Community members travel the country talking about their work and love, so that other people might be inspired to care for others through kindness, love, and justice wherever they might be.*** ~



That vision of caring for others with different life stories and sharing ideas of caring across the world is important for Christians, because we are taught to care even for the people who are most different from us. The apostle Paul, one of the earliest leaders in the church, was committed to teaching people to love each other, to really care in big and small ways, no matter what. For people who love God, he wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). While we might not be familiar with the categories of difference Paul wrote about, we certainly find diversity in our communities.

What are some of the ways we think about difference today? What's one way that you are loving and connected to people who are different from you?

Even the ways that we think we might be most different from each other can't separate us from loving each other. That's why Christians are called to show loving kindness and practical care for all people, no matter their citizenship, their body or intellectual ability, their gender or race; no matter how much money they have, whom they love, where they live, or what cultural practices they have or religious beliefs they hold.

When we think about this kind of love for people who are different from us, people who we may not even know, we might like to revisit the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. This was one of Jesus's most important teaching stories, called parables, because it reminds us that every person in the world is our neighbor, and we are called to love anyone who crosses our paths.

For younger children

SAY: Jesus taught us to love each other, but love is more than just a feeling. We love others by taking care of them, treating them fairly, and remembering that we are all loved by God.

DO: Learn and practice part of the love mediation: "May you be healthy; may you be happy; may you know you are loved," and "May I be healthy; may I be happy; may I know I am loved."

PRAY: God, help me grow in love and care for myself and others. Amen.