

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles  
May 18, 2025**

**“Do All the Good You Can”  
Text: John 10:22-30**

When we were living in Iowa City, we had good friends who had a baby. It was their second child. We went by a week or two after the birth to bring a gift and to see the newborn. While there, the father shared a hilarious story.

They were anxious about how their firstborn child would react to this newborn. For three years, Jacob had been the sole focus of the household. Everything seemed to revolve around him. But now there was a baby sister and he would have to share the spotlight.

From the first moment of meeting his little sister, Jacob was a loving big brother. He wanted to hold her, to talk to her, he took interest in all that she did. All was going well until Monday morning when Jacob came into the kitchen carrying a little backpack. Puzzled, his parents asked him what he was doing. With utmost seriousness, he said that now that he had a little sister to care for he was going to go get a job. He was serious. With a little sister to care for, he thought his new role was to get a job and go to work. His parents lovingly assured him that he was too young to work and that all he needed to do was to continue enjoying being a child. Work could wait. For now, his job was to play and enjoy life.

I share that story because it addresses the question I want to talk about this morning, namely what is it that we are to do with our lives.

That question often leads me to the poetry of Mary Oliver, particularly one poem entitled, “The Summer Day.” In it she begins with questions about who made the world, the swan, the black bear, the grasshopper. Reading these opening lines, one is left with a sense that she is sitting in nature somewhere, quietly paying attention to what she sees around her. After such observations and questions she writes,

*I don't know exactly what prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?*

What will we do with this one wild and precious life? A lot of times that question becomes a matter of what vocation we will pursue. What will be our life ambition and work? But it is a lot more than that. It isn't about whether we will be a teacher or an engineer, a musician or a lawyer or any number of the possibilities that exist. What will we do with this one wild and precious life is about much more than the work week. It is about who we are as people.

Jesus was walking into the Temple during one of the festivals. Some of the people saw him there and confronted him with a question similar to the one we are looking at. They ask him, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, come out and tell us plainly." There are a couple of things behind this comment.

For one, they are confused. Is Jesus the Messiah or not. Likely from their perspective, he acts like it sometimes. And at other times he doesn't. And so they are uncertain. They have seen his actions or are aware of the things he has done. But they want more. Just tell us plainly. Come out and say it. Are you the Messiah or not?

But also behind this is a question of expectations. As I said, sometimes Jesus is doing the kinds of things they would expect from the Messiah. But at others, he acts very different. And so this becomes a statement about their expectations. Jesus is not performing up to their expectations.

It is interesting, but no one has ever fulfilled the expectations of being a Messiah to that point. There have been prophets and wise leaders, but no Messiah. So, to say that there is a precedent for how a Messiah should act and what they should do is not accurate. They can't compare Jesus' actions to previous Messiahs for an indication of what he should be doing. This is something new, but from their standpoint, Jesus isn't doing it right.

Yes, he is a respected teacher, but some of his teachings have begun to be questioned. On many occasions, he spoke about forgiveness, which is always nice when you are on the receiving end of that forgiveness. But Jesus asked them to forgive people they didn't want to forgive. He was a bit too liberal with his grace and that led some to question his effectiveness.

Yes, Jesus is building bridges and you would expect a Messiah and religious leader to do this. But his bridges have been to people like a Samaritan woman at the well, tax collectors and other questionable people. They are pleased that he is reaching out, but he seems to reach out to the wrong people.

Yes, Jesus is religiously astute, and in this particular instance has made it a priority to be at the Temple during a religious festival. But he is often heard questioning some of the basic tenets of their faith. He has publicly worked on the Sabbath. Just prior to today's reading, he forgave a woman who had been caught in adultery. Jesus has a solid awareness of the teachings of the faith, but sometimes he can be a bit lax in how these rules and laws are enforced.

From their standpoint, Jesus is sending mixed messages. They want an answer. Are you the Messiah or not? And one can presume that if he says that he is, their next comment is going to be, "then start acting like it." Meaning, live up to our expectations.

Jesus replies to their question by saying that he has told them. He points out that his actions testify to who he is. If you want to know who I am and what I stand for and what I believe, pay attention to the things that I do. That will tell you.

What Jesus is saying to them is that the actions they have seen answer the question of whether he is the Messiah or not. And rather than coming out and saying it explicitly, it becomes a matter of how they define Messiah. For those who are expecting a military leader who will overthrow the Roman occupation, Jesus is not going to be their guy. But if your understanding of the Messiah is someone who points us in the direction of the two great commandments to love God and to love our neighbor, perhaps his actions tell us all that we need to know. His actions speak of love and kindness and compassion and that is the answer he will provide.

I want to take a moment now to address our graduates, here and online. You will be asked, “So what are you going to do for the rest of your life?” That is a heavy burden. Some of the most interesting people I have known have re-invented themselves many times. They have tried on different jobs, different activities, sometimes doing things very far afield from where they began. It is asking a lot of anyone to presume that you know what you want to do for the rest of your life.

My small bit of wisdom that I have to offer to you and to all of us here today is that it is less concerning what work you will do during your lifetime. More important is how you will do the things that you do.

The summer I graduated from college, I took a job with the sole purpose of saving as much money as I could for seminary. Unfortunately, a month before I was to move, the company announced that they were letting the summer employees go. I worried about finding another job knowing that I was only going to be around for a month.

I was grateful that a friend found a job at the Evansville airport. I worked whatever jobs were needed with the maintenance crew there. I loved the diverse work that we did, day after day and driving bulldozers and other heavy equipment. The first day on the job I learned that everyone brought their lunch and they all ate together around a large table. It was a great way for the staff of about 8-10 to get to know one another.

It was during one of those lunches that I learned that all of the workers went home right after work, had a dinner or rested a bit, and then met up at a former co-workers home. This co-worker was living with cancer and he needed a new roof. He couldn't afford it so his colleagues would meet at his home every night and work. They did this because they cared about this man.

After working there a few days I asked if they needed another hand and was pleased to get to help. At the end of the night, the men knocked on the window and the man came and opened the screen. It took him a while to get there and when he did I could see he was on oxygen. They told him what they had done, what they would work on the next time and waved goodbye.

The last week I was there, they received a phone call at the airport, saying the man had died. There was a lot of sadness in the room, but also appreciation that they had completed the work on his house. That was important to them.

For all the graduates here today, I am grateful for whatever work you choose to do. But more important than what you do is how you do it. Do the things you do with love. Fill the world with kindness. When people are mean and cruel and unkind to one another, respond with genuine kindness. Not because you will shame them with that kindness and lead them to live differently. It is always possible. But I want to encourage you to be kind and loving because it is the right thing to do and because that is what you want to put into the world.

There is a quote that is attributed to the founder of the United Methodist Church, John Wesley. Don't tell anyone I said this, but there is no direct match for this quote from any of Wesley's sermons or writings. But he said things that provide a partial match. But whether it is from Wesley or a compilation of his sayings or just a distillation of many sermons, it is a great quote. It is called, John Wesley's Rule of Life and it goes like this:

*Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can*

That is a worthy goal. And no matter what you choose for your life's work, these are all important ways to conduct oneself. And no matter what vocation you choose, whether employed or retired, whether it is something you are paid to do or something you volunteer to do, doing all things with love and kindness is the finest way to live.

There are a lot of closing stories I could share, but what came to mind was one of the stories in the book, "This I Believe." These are brief essays written by celebrities, world leaders, athletes and every day people. And one that I love is entitled, "There Is No Such Thing as Too Much Barbecue." One might be surprised to discover that the author, Jason Sheehan, is a famous food restaurant critic who has dined in some of the finest restaurants in the world.

In this essay he speaks of the importance of barbecue. It is soul food, comfort food, and health food. When he is feeling sick, he wants barbecue. When he is sad, barbecue lifts his spirits. He writes, "I believe that good barbecue requires no décor...paper plates are okay in a barbecue joint. And paper napkins. And plastic silverware. Skinny people can eat barbecue, and do, but the kitchen should always cook for a fat man who hasn't eaten since breakfast. My leftovers should last for days. I believe that if you don't get sauce under your nails when you're eating, you're doing it wrong. I believe that if you don't ruin your shirt, you're not trying hard enough."

Whether you are cooking barbecue in the backyard to serve to friends or helping a neighbor who is sick or giving a cold drink of water to someone who is thirsty, or showing up at a funeral for

someone you hardly knew or reading to a child or smiling at a stranger or volunteering to serve food to the hungry or sending a card or letter to someone going through a difficult time, do these things, do all things with love.

Mary Oliver asked,

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?*

It is a good question and worthy of our reflection. But more important is how we will do these things. Do it with love, with kindness, with compassion.