

# biblestudy: november 2022

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## November 6, 2022 Text: Acts 17:16-31 “Paul in Athens”

In this week’s text, Paul shows a remarkable patience with folks who do not agree with him. (That’s a quality that sometimes seems to be in short supply.) For example, he has seen idols all over the place (Acts 17:16), but instead of accusing the people of Athens of perpetuating falsehoods, he describes this condition to show that they are religious (Acts 17:22). And when he begins to teach them about God (Acts 17:24), he even finds a way to quote something good that the poets of Athens have said (Acts 17:28).

Now, it is quite true that not everyone was persuaded by Paul’s address (Acts 17:32), but others—praise the Lord!—wanted to hear more and became believers (Acts 17:33).

How do we live with our differences? How patient are we with those who walk to a different drumbeat? How do we find where there is common ground upon which the Lord can build tomorrow? Do I only talk with people with whom I agree? Does my life match what I am telling others about the Gospel? What is of the irreplaceable essence of my relationship with Jesus Christ?

Even though the apostle builds on mutual understandings, he comes to a point where he draws a line in the spiritual sand. The world is going to be judged by the standard of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). The invitation then is to repent (Acts 17:30). Uh, I re-read that passage in the New Re-

vised Standard Version to see if I am excused from that call. I see words like “human,” “all people everywhere,” and “the world.” Those inclusive terms do not leave much hiding place from the command of God.

In *The United Methodist Hymnal* (248), there is a hymn with an interesting refrain. One stanza speaks of the birth of Christ; another stanza tells of the coming of the wise men; the final stanza celebrates the angels who sing with joy because of Christ’s birth. The challenge comes in the refrain. After each stanza, we sing “Ideo-o-o.” There is an asterisk that directs us to the meaning of that word. “Ideo” means “therefore.” Christ is born...therefore. Wise men come...therefore. Angels sing...therefore. And now we have heard the good news. What is the therefore in my life?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

N. T. Wright (*Surprised by Hope*, Harper One) wrote: “What you do in the Lord is not in vain...You are—strange as it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Grace giving God, use me...”

## November 13, 2022 Text: 2 Kings 5:1-19 “Go in Peace, Naaman”

Elisha had a ton of reasons not to go to bat for Naaman. (1) Naaman was a high-powered official in an enemy army (2 Kings 5:1). (2) He suffered from leprosy, a highly contagious “don’t touch me” skin disease (5:1). (3) Naaman captured a young girl from Israel and made her his wife (5:2). (4) The king of Israel thought Naaman and his troupe were trying to get a fight started (5:7). (5) Naaman got bent out of shape when Elisha tried to help him (5:11). (6) He went away in a rage because Elisha did not simply wave a hand and cure him (5:12). (7) By listing all the good rivers “back home” Naaman challenged Elisha’s invitation to go to the Jordan River (5:12). The score is Naaman’s Ego 7, Elisha’s Ability to Help 0.

Naaman did not trust Elisha, but he did trust his own servants, so when they pointed out the benefits of washing in the Jordan (5:13), he did so. And he was healed. When he realized that his leprosy was gone, Naaman began to praise God and became a believer in the Lord (5:15). Naaman asks for forgiveness (5:18).

Elisha did not let Naaman’s attitude deflect Elisha from his prophetic role. In fact, he said, “Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” (2 Kings 5:8). I am left with the question: What do others learn about God when they see how I act?

Uh, oh! It is one thing to enjoy the strong life of Elisha and to value

his steady care for a non-believer. It is quite another thing to recognize that the same challenge is put to me: How do I relate to people who are hostile or casual about the faith?

The truth is that most of my contacts and relationships are with folks from within the faith family. When I look around the sanctuary on Sunday morning, who is present and who is absent? Who feels welcomed? Who feels left out? Who is “the Naaman” in my community and how would he or she be treated in my contact?

Even within the faith community, there are those who come as a Naaman. Because of language, sexual orientation, gender, political views—you name it—they come as a difference, even as an outsider. How can the Church be an Elisha to them?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Inspired* (Thomas Nelson), Rachel Held Evans wrote: “Often I hear from readers who left their churches because they had no songs for them to sing after the miscarriage, the shooting, the earthquake, the divorce, the diagnosis, the attack, the bankruptcy.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Help me help when it is not good...”

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November 20, 2022 Text: Exodus 18:1, 13-27 “Wisdom from Another Tradition”

If there were an election and the two candidates were Moses and Jethro, my vote is going to go to Moses. Yet, in this week’s focal text, it is Jethro, a priest of Midian (Exodus 18:1), who brings wisdom and insight and helpful advice to Moses, a leader of the people of Israel (Exodus 18:13-27).

That got me to wondering. Would I hear and appreciate any insight from someone from a tradition different from my own? Can a Democrat hear a good idea from a Republican? Can a Republican hear a good idea from a Democrat? Can church progressives learn from church conservatives and can church conservatives learn from church progressives? Can Christians gain wisdom from Hindus and can Hindus gain wisdom from Christians? Somehow, I suspect that God has not given me and my kind the full range of wisdom!

Sometimes it is hard to determine where the credit for an idea should go. The story about how to share leadership appears in the Old Testament three times and each time a different entity gets credit. In this account, Jethro is the one (Exodus 18:17-18). When the same strategy for life is discussed in Numbers 11, it is the Lord Himself who has the idea. Deuteronomy 1:13 gives an account of the same wisdom and it is Moses who generates the plan. At a minimum, this all suggests that I should be super-cautious before taking credit for a good plan! Maybe

I “borrowed” someone else’s wisdom...even someone from another tradition.

In reflection on this week’s study of Jethro and Moses, I am reminded not to give up on the possibility of wisdom coming from an unexpected source. Also, I should be willing to offer my own perceptions to those who usually disagree with me. This story from Exodus illustrates the breadth of the human experience and how God has broken through in varying ways to varying people.

How do I separate the wheat from the chaff (Matthew 3:12)? There is clearly a distinction between the two, but Moses and Jethro invite me to be open to God’s surprising wheat in surprising places.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Alice Knotts (*Fellowship of Love: Methodist Women Changing American Racial Attitudes*, Kingswood Books) has written: “Central to the process (for peace) is the need to overcome barriers to communication based on assumptions about race, gender, religion, and national origin, and to cross these boundaries to share economic and political power.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Who and what am I missing, Lord?...”

November 27, 2022 Text: Romans 14:13-19 “When in Rome...”

When the apostle Paul wrote the Church in Rome, he often got to the basics of the Christian experience. In chapter fourteen, he has written about some of the things that divide the faithful, such as what to eat (Romans 14:2-3), which holidays to observe (Romans 14:5), what is clean or unclean to do (Romans 14:14). What is to be done when one lives in a community of such division? (And what are our dividing issues today?)

Paul answers such queries in verse 19. We are to pursue *ěirēne* and *ōikōdōmēō*. Those words get translated as “peace” and as “build up.” Literally, the word for peace comes from a root that means “to join together.” Literally, the word for “build up” comes from an architectural term for “building a house.”

In *The Message*, a biblical paraphrase by Eugene Peterson, verse 19 reads: “So let’s agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words; don’t drag them down by finding fault.”

Resolutions for a fresh start often come at New Year’s, but could we not resolve now—the first Sunday in Advent—to practice these blessings for our life together?

What would peace mean in your congregation? What would peace

mean in your denomination? What would peace mean in your daily life? How can you build up new strength in your congregation? How can you build up new strength in your denomination? How can you build up new strength in your own life?

Paul is a realist. His appeal for peace and mutual upbuilding (v. 19) is in the context of naming some of the things that divide. Peace is not the absence of fighting; it is joining together. Let’s not pretend that all is well when there are broken places in our journey. Yes, Paul names them (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 13, 15, 21). Maybe that is a first step toward the goal of peace and mutual upbuilding: naming the broken places.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Who Cares About the Middle East?* Poems for Reflection and Conviction (Resource Publications), S T Kimbrough, Jr. has written: “If you pursue progress and peace, you’ll find they have no end. The quest for both can never cease; they on pursuit depend....Their errors and successes few, or manifold they be, require them further to pursue with full capacity.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Holy God, as we begin this journey to Bethlehem, travel with us that we might touch peace and we might strengthen others...”



Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;  
for His steadfast love endures forever!

1 CHRONICLES 16:34 (ESV)

“All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen.”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson