

June 28, 2026

Luke 10:25-37
Ephesians 6:15

“Journeying on God’s Path of Peace”
Jennifer Riddle

From June 8th through 12th, 53 kids, ages 5 to 12, gathered at Interfaith Peace Camp. They were supported by 17 teen counselors in training and 50 adults who ranged from daily group guides to lunch helpers, behind-the-scenes planners and cleaners, specialty station helpers, and peaceful playroom support. It takes A LOT of people to keep a camp running when we meet for 35 hours!

Interfaith Peace Camp came alive 4 years ago, when Adrienne Summerlot, the Religious Educator at the Unitarian Universalist congregation, contacted me about joining their Peace Camp. At the time, UUCI didn’t have a large population of kids, so she wanted to partner with other justice-minded congregations for this camp. I wasn’t really sure what Peace Camp would look like, but I was open to deepening our interfaith partnership that had begun through Columbus Interfaith.

That first year was a challenge, to put it mildly. We didn’t have enough volunteers or planned activities. It felt like what we were doing was a bit haphazard and more focused on summer fun rather than spiritual formation. At that point, we were interfaith in name only and it was NOT a very peaceful peace camp for the adults involved! However, the feedback from campers was positive, so we decided to do it again.

The last three years since the first camp have been full of process development and change. Adrienne and I learned how to use our gifts more effectively—me with planning and organization, her with art and on-the-fly creativity. We also sought additional planning partners from a variety of faith traditions. In summer 2025, we started a daily Interfaith Afternoon focus, where one faith group would share about their tradition to the whole camp, starting with our afternoon meeting and moving to stations that would deepen learning through hands-on activities.

This year, when First Presbyterian hosted Interfaith Afternoon, I taught the campers about Mister Rogers’ Presbyterian roots and his desire to teach peace by loving his neighbors. We watched a 1969 video of Mister Rogers cooling his feet in a kiddie pool with Officer Clemmons, a Black man. We talked about the message Mister Rogers was sending in response to segregation in public pools. Mister Rogers knew that being a neighbor and a peacemaker sometimes meant you made waves, and not just in a pool.

One of the things Adrienne and I have desired to share with our campers is that peacemaking isn’t easy. It involves justice work that riles people up. In order for us to make lasting change that benefits us all, it must make all of us uncomfortable with unjust systems. We have to be driven to change them, even when that costs us something.

Jesus was a peacemaker who flipped tables and sat with all the wrong people at dinner. He was best friends with the poor and people who robbed the Jews of their tax money. He also seemed to enjoy getting into pointed discussions with the Jewish religious establishment. The setting of today’s Gospel text is one such occasion.

Jesus is asked by a lawyer about gaining eternal life, and they agreed that loving God and loving others is at the core. But the lawyer was looking to poke the bear. He pressed Jesus to respond about who his neighbor might actually be. If they were discussing mere legal standing, they might need to clarify who one's neighbors are, but as Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine puts it, "...in the context of love, [the lawyer's] question is not relevant. According to Leviticus, love has to extend beyond the people in one's group." So therefore, by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer is, in fact, asking, "Whom can I hate?"

This is quite a shift from what you may know about this parable. Popular culture surrounds us with the language of Good Samaritan: Good Samaritan laws, Good Samaritan hospitals, and anyone who is a helper being labeled as a Good Samaritan. Its meaning has been reduced and romanticized to this definition: "if someone is having a problem on the side of the road, you should stop and help." It seems simple. But if that was the case, Jesus' parable wouldn't have been necessary since he and the lawyer already agreed on the value of loving others. Something else is going on here.

We must remember what the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan meant in Jewish society. The priest and Levite were leaders in the Jewish faith. One would have expected them to help the man who had been beaten and left for dead in the road. But some level of fear compelled them to keep going on by. Jesus doesn't elaborate on this because their lack of helping isn't the point of the story.

Finally, the Samaritan arrives on the scene. Samaritans were mortal enemies of the Jews. Levine instructs us to view them as ones who functioned as Jewish oppressors. The man who was dying in the road would have expected the Samaritan to walk by with indifference, but he was instead full of compassion. This was a surprising turn of events.

When Martin Luther King Jr. preached about this parable, he posited that the priest and the Levite did not stop to help out of fear, thinking, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" whereas the Samaritan considered, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" The orientation of self-preservation contrasted with orientation to the other makes all the difference.

It's easier to put our enemies in a box. We don't want our enemies doing nice things because that messes up our neat categories of us and them. I wonder if some of this category-breaking is what's been happening with international visitors to the US during the World Cup this summer. Many have noted with surprise at the kindness and helpfulness of Americans to foreign visitors, in contrast to what they expected when they arrived. Personal experience and proximity often blows up our categories.

In this parable, Jesus is intentionally destroying our paradigms of who our friends and enemies are. He is emphasizing to us all that there are good and beautiful things that happen with the people we mock and malign. They are not all bad and we are not all good. There is always more beneath the surface.

This is a challenging teaching for me. Despite the fact that I do my best to serve as an ally for people on the margins, I am just as quick to point a mocking finger at those who hold different political positions. I minimize and pigeonhole people. I think our age of political polarization and the distancing created by the online world has made this tendency worse, but as we can see from Jesus' parable, it is a tale as old as time.

The inclination to make judgments about people different from us is one of the reasons that Interfaith Peace Camp exists. In our bright red county, despite the valuable contributions of people of a variety of backgrounds and faiths, otherness is feared and maligned. Interfaith Peace Camp is one small way that we can help our kids get closer to people who believe and worship in a way that may be different from them. There they find heaps of common ground to share. It may not be perfect, but it's an annual opportunity to push our boundaries of compassion just a little bit farther.

As we consider all this, I ask: who is our neighbor? That can be a surprisingly hard question to answer. It may be easy for us in this congregation to say that folks in marginalized communities are our neighbors, because we are a church of allies and advocates. But what about people that we consider to be oppressors? MAGA, or racists, homophobes, and White Christian Nationalists? What about Donald Trump? Are they our neighbors as well? Jesus would say yes. I think that may be where the gospel of peace lives for us today.

What then should be our goal? I think we need to put true humanity on people we might perceive to be our enemies. Peacemaking must be something we act upon rather than a value we merely hold in our hearts. This means we need to spend more time getting to know folks of other belief systems rather than blasting them from our phone screens. I don't have a lot of great ideas about how exactly we do that. I do have concern for people from marginalized groups attempting to love their oppressors only to become victimized again. I have more questions than answers about living out this text. Maybe that's why we remind kids in Godly Play that parables are hard to enter.

I wonder if that's Jesus' point—that we shouldn't have clear answers. We can't lawyer love or compassion. We can, however, enact peace in many ways. Day by day we can simply open ourselves up to being transformed by love itself. It can look like singing songs in Arabic, or baking matzah with our Jewish friends, or by a slightly unruly teenage helper unexpectedly providing exactly what you need. Or maybe even by an unexpected stranger welcoming us to cool our aching feet in a kiddie pool.

May we all be transformed by God's unexpected compassion on us. And as we are transformed, let us put on whatever will make us ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace.

Amen.