



RELIGION & RACE

General Commission on Religion and Race

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Session 4: I Choose Love

*In the midst of pain, I choose love
In the midst of war, I choose peace
When my world falls down, I will rise
In the midst of pain, I choose love.*

By Lindy Thompson

Watch the Video Clip (5 – 7 minutes)

Listen to Mark's words of introduction and listen to the song. Listen to the song a second time. Feel free to sing along. If you have purchased the songbook *Roll Down, Justice!*, a reproducible congregational box of the song is found on page 105.

Mark Miller's Reflection

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The gospel stories of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, continue to inspire, uplift, and amaze me. They inspire, uplift, and amaze me because Jesus consistently chooses love. When it would be easier for him to appease with the powerful religious leaders and Roman backed authorities he chooses love. Even as his friends disappear and the crowds that once shouted "hosanna" turn on him with shouts of "crucify!" he chooses love. Even after betrayal and humiliation, even when he is dying, he chooses love.

The words to the song "I Choose Love" are by my friend Lindy Thompson, written in response to the murder of nine (9) people who were at their church bible study. The people of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal church of Charleston, S.C. chose love when they offered forgiveness in the face of race hatred and violence.

We always have a choice. Every day we have a choice - how will the events of your day and your life affect you? It's the challenge of the witness of Jesus- the challenge of a truly faithful life- a daily spiritual discipline for each of us to rise up every day and say "I choose love."

Moment of Meditation (2 – 3 minutes)

Call the groups' attention to the nine chairs that you have set up in the room. Ask them to remember the news story when a Bible study became a blood bath. Using a notebook or a sheet of paper, respond individually and silently to the video, the song, and Mark's introduction. Jot down responses to one or more of these questions:

- What breaks your heart?
- In what areas of your life do you need to choose love?

Discuss the Scripture - Luke 23:34 (10 minutes)

Have the scripture verse read aloud in two or three translations. Invite members to share with the group any experience they have with the text. For example, this scripture may remind someone of the isolation that he or she experienced upon getting divorced. Or perhaps the scripture inspires someone to forgive, to overlook some ways in which people are being disrespectful and hateful. Perhaps it calls to mind a time when a person chose love in the midst of a painful situation.

Connect with the Justice Challenges (20 minutes)

Meet in smaller groups (three or four persons). Have each group identify what for them might be the most difficult situations for their members to forgive. Consider bringing these scenarios to their attention as a discussion starter:

- People who murdered my child – act of terrorism, act of rage, random violence
- Being overlooked for a promotion and asked to train the new person
- Being asked to leave a job – fired or laid off
- Being forced to buy health insurance
- Being asked to leave a church

Invite each group to identify two or three of their situations where they find it hard to forgive or forget. Give every group a chance to respond although it is not mandatory that all share.

Confession (2 – 3 minutes)

Encourage the group to observe a moment of silence as they remember the words of the scripture, the song, and Mark's introduction. Tell them that during the time of confession they are free to speak aloud a sentence of confession of how they--their family, church, or community-- have failed to love, failed to forgive, failed to believe that each person can begin again. Note: Be sure to remind the group to maintain confidentiality--that the confession does not identify others unwittingly.

Lead the group in this prayer: God, we have closed our hearts and turned away. Forgive us. In this moment, we confess that we have not been all that you want us to be. Forgive us. Please hear our confessions at this time (silently or aloud): _____.

Prayer of Intercession (2 – 3 minutes)

Lead the group in this prayer (or one from the heart):

Lord Jesus, we are committed to being your witness in this world. But Lord God, sometimes it is hard, it is difficult, it is painful. We have sat with these 9 empty chairs. This could have been our Bible study; it could happen to us right now. Give us strength and courage to choose love and peace and hope in the midst of every situation.

Closing (2 - 3 minutes)

Play the video one more time and sing along. Offer a prayer of benediction and an invitation to see God in every face that we meet in the coming week.

Extending the Study

Use the song as a solo response to a sermon on this text and in churches that offer a "Seven Last Words" service on Good Friday.

Identify, plan, and carry out a mission project that will demonstrate love in the community (if not already doing, collect for a local food bank or provide toiletries and paper goods for a local shelter).

Commit to a week of choosing love. Intentionally interrupt bad memories and angry thoughts and use this mantra: "today, at this moment – through my pain, through my fear, through my rage – I choose love."

Consider reconciliation. Is there someone who has been shut out of your life – by that person's choice or your own – that you would consider renewing a relationship? Note: not every relationship that is ruptured warrants repair; forgiveness is not the same thing as trust.