

Abundant Life: A Kin-dom Ethic of Flourishing (a talk for the St Albans Group of the Progressive Christianity Network Britain)

Amanda Udis-Kessler, September 23, 2021; slightly updated October 2, 2021; copyright 2021

Introducing an Ethic of Flourishing

Thank you so much for having me with you today. A death in the family made it impossible for me to send any materials earlier, but I will use our time today to introduce an ethical approach I've been developing. I'll start by setting up some core ideas, and after our first conversation, I'll consider how this ethical approach fits with the progressive Christian worldview as it emerges from Jesus's vision of the Kin-dom of God, or what we might call Beloved Community or Love's Domain.

I didn't start my life as an ethicist. I studied comparative religion in college, got a sociology doctorate, and then went to seminary for a year. But the more I studied ethics, the more frustrated I got with the standard approaches. As a sociologist, I became impatient with ethics based on abstract principles like justice rather than on insights about what people are actually like and what we actually need to live well. I also felt that the standard approaches gave far too much weight to the power of rational thinking. Rational thinking has been a mixed blessing for humanity, contributing both to some of humanity's greatest accomplishments and to some of our most astonishing cruelty. Moreover, as a politically progressive feminist and queer person, I felt that the main ethical theories were oddly lacking in a dedicated focus on human well-being. What was the point of ethics, if not to help all people flourish?

The approach I'm about to share came to me the day I read an open letter by a US right-wing media personality written in response to yet another mass shooting. The letter was intended for the parents of the young people killed in the shooting. At one point in the letter, the man wrote, "...as harsh as this sounds, your dead kids don't trump my constitutional [gun] rights." That sentence stopped me in my tracks. It was so obviously ethically wrong. But it also followed naturally from the power and moral centrality rights are accorded in the U.S.

Of course, rights are important. As a woman and queer person, I need access to certain rights. But rights are not a simple matter. Rights can be used for good or for ill, to support human flourishing or to cause unnecessary, avoidable human suffering. The U.S focus on gun rights puts an abstract principle above the well-being and actual lives of real people. Antiabortion activists similarly use the idea of the rights of the "pre-born" to deny women our rights. When we consider the range of ways in which the idea of rights are used, we can see rights in and of themselves are not inherently a moral good. They can be used for good or evil, to help or to harm.

As I read that letter, it became clear to me: rights are not the point. Rights are not an end in themselves, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant would have said. Rights are rather a means to an end, the end of human well-being. Rights used in the service of human flourishing are a moral good; rights used in the service of human suffering are a moral evil. The same could be said of freedom, justice, care, duty, virtue, and all other ethical and political principles. People, not

principles, are the point of ethics. All people, without exception, ought to have the opportunity to thrive, to live rich, joyful, safe, meaningful, productive lives, and to avoid unnecessary suffering. Any humane approach to ethics begins with this claim, a claim about people and human well-being, not a claim about abstract principles.

If we understand ethically good acts as those that support our flourishing and the flourishing of others, and if we understand ethically bad acts as those that contribute to otherwise avoidable suffering, the way we think ethically about any principle or value or action or cultural norm or social institution changes. If, per my above example, the principle of rights alone is insufficient to guide our morality, we need to know the consequences of specific rights for specific people to understand the morality of those rights. Do those rights lead to flourishing or to suffering, and for whom? We can ask the same questions about freedom or about organized religion or about capitalism or about any, and every, aspect of our lives.

This approach to ethics, while conceptually straightforward, is very complicated in practice. It's one thing to claim that human flourishing, and planetary flourishing for that matter, is a moral good, and that avoidable human and planetary suffering is a moral ill. But what does that mean on a day-to-day basis? How does this insight provide guidance for our actions or for the way society is organized? How do we live ethically and help others live ethically when ethical living is centered on human and planetary well-being?

Here's where the sociology comes in. We may not know every detail about every individual, but we do know some basic things about what it means to be a person. We can start with the fact that all people, as human beings, share certain characteristics and traits.

We are social and relational beings.

We are embodied, physical beings.

We are emotional beings.

We are meaning-making beings.

We are learning beings.

We are moral and ethical beings, and sometimes immoral and unethical beings.

We are creative beings.

We are spiritual beings. We can experience awe, reverence, wonder, and a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves. Our spirituality can be tied to organized religion but it does not need to be.

We are agentic beings, which is to say that we have self-efficacy and the need to act on and have an impact on the world around us.

These characteristics and traits have important implications for our flourishing and suffering, because that flourishing and suffering is often tied to these aspects of our humanity.

As social beings, people flourish when they are treated well and can establish meaningful relationships with family members, friends, colleagues, and others. People suffer when they are shunned, isolated, devalued, mistreated, or otherwise kept from meaningful relationships.

As embodied beings, people flourish when they are physically safe and have sufficient resources for bodily health (including food, water, clean air, clothing, a place to live, and appropriate and affordable healthcare, among other things). People flourish when they have opportunities to use their bodies for pleasure and accomplishment. People suffer when their bodies are harmed, when they can't access resources for bodily health, and when they are restricted from using their bodies for efficacy and enjoyment.

As emotional beings, people flourish when they are free of fear and have unfettered access to the full range of their emotions, enjoying positive emotions and processing and releasing negative ones. People suffer when they are subjected to systematic fear or emotional trauma, have deeply negative life experiences that limit joy and cause pain, or are unable to process and release negative emotions.

As meaning-making beings, people flourish when they can make sense of their lives and the world around them in ways that are empowering and positive and that provide guidance for action. People suffer when their lives don't make sense or only make sense in terms of negative experiences and understandings of the world.

As beings for whom learning is important, people flourish when they are able to add to their knowledge, skills, and capabilities over the course of their lives, and to contribute to others' ability to learn. People suffer when they are not permitted to learn or when they are restricted in the kinds of things thought acceptable for them to learn (based on a social identity such as gender or race, for example), or when they are not permitted to teach others.

As moral beings, people flourish when they are empowered to live according to a moral code that makes sense to them and that leads them to treat themselves and others well. People suffer when the prevailing morality teaches them that they are inherently immoral and unworthy of positive treatment or when they cannot live according to their own best moral understanding because circumstances prevent them from making what they would consider moral choices.

As creative beings, people flourish when they are able to do their own creating in whatever form has integrity for them and when they can experience and appreciate the creativity of others. People suffer when they are restricted from being creative and do not have access to the creative products or processes of other people. I'm including artistic creativity here, but not restricting creativity to the arts. This ethical project, for example, is a creative project, as are all academic projects and many other kinds of activities involving ideas, things, and people.

As spiritual beings, people flourish when their lives are filled with gratitude, awe, wonder, humility, reverence, and other responses to being part of a larger story, community, or

experience than just themselves. As I said earlier, this might be an explicitly religious story, community, or experience, but it need not be. People suffer when they are cut off from such opportunities or when they learn that the world is inherently bleak, violent, and harmful, worthy of fear but not of gratitude.

As efficacious beings who need to act in the world and have an impact on the world, people flourish when they are able to pursue their desires, take action, and have an effect on those around them. People suffer when their agency is blocked, whether by cultural values, by social inequality, or for some other reason.

The more people can flourish across all the different aspects of humanity described above, the richer our lives are and the more we can tend to others and contribute to society. The more people are forced to suffer across the different aspects of humanity described above, the harder our lives are and the less we are able to give back to the world.

The details of this flourishing and suffering will be different for different people. We are, after all, individuals, with unique experiences and stories. And we each belong to multiple social groups, some valued and some devalued, some privileged and some disempowered, some rewarded and some punished. For example, as a woman and a queer person, I've experienced sexism and homophobia, both of which have caused me unnecessary suffering and have blocked some of my flourishing. As a white person in a white supremacist society, however, I have access to social goods, opportunities and experiences, as well as freedom from restrictions and mistrust, and this access and freedom, both of which are based on my race, have enabled me to flourish in certain ways and have kept me from needing to suffer in certain ways.

In order to think comprehensively about the ethics of flourishing, we need to hold a complex truth in our minds. We are human beings with common traits and characteristics such as those I just described at some length. We are individuals with particular stories, interpretations of the world, gifts, and burdens. And we are members of multiple differently valued social groups, meaning that we benefit or suffer based on where our social groups exist within hierarchies of inequality.

Moreover, we are human beings, individuals, and members of social groups all at the same time and all the time. At any given moment, our individuality might be the most salient thing about us, or a group membership might be. But at all times, those human characteristics are in play. We are always embodied. We are always emotional. We are always social. And so on. This means that our lives are full of flourishing and suffering across these different aspects of our humanity.

This approach to ethics has many implications for how we care for ourselves and others, both individually and more broadly. If we care about our own embodied flourishing, for example, we need to take action to make sure that we are safe, that we have access to the necessary resources for physical health, and that we are able to use our bodies for pleasure, empowerment, and accomplishment. If we care about the embodied flourishing of others, we need to take action to make sure that they are safe, that they have access to the necessary resources for physical health, and that they are able to use their bodies for good in the world and for their own pleasure and joy. Once we bring the lofty language of human flourishing down to the specifics of human

needs, we begin to see concrete ways that we can contribute to our own flourishing and to the flourishing of others, both people we know and people we don't know, as well as concrete ways to work against our own suffering and the suffering of others.

Tending to human flourishing often has a political component because we live in a world that does not in fact value the flourishing of all people and in which many people are perfectly content for many other people to suffer. The cultural mechanisms of all forms of systematic inequality, from class inequality to Islamophobia, from white supremacy to heterosexism, and from sexism to ableism, allow people on the valued side of any form of inequality to simply not care about those on the devalued side – perhaps not even to see them as fully human, but at a minimum, to see them as not deserving of a life of flourishing.

So, if we are serious about supporting the flourishing of all people, we have to keep in mind that complex truth about people being human beings and individuals and group members, and we need to work concretely for the well-being of people in devalued and disempowered social groups, especially if we are not members of those groups. As an example, if I benefit from being white in a white supremacist society and if the benefits that I receive help me flourish, that means people of color in the same white supremacist society are being penalized for their race and are suffering needlessly because of it. If I care about their flourishing, I must work for racial justice, even what that work makes demands on me and calls for some self-sacrifice. That ethical demand arises naturally from my commitment to the flourishing of all people, not merely to my own flourishing.

To be clear, then, my commitment to the flourishing of all people means a commitment to the flourishing of people I have never met and will never know. Unlike feminist care ethics, this approach does not focus primarily on how we attend to the flourishing of people closest to us, though it takes their flourishing and our own into account. Because this way of thinking about ethics can be as broad as our imaginations will allow, it requires some discernment on our part. Are there times when our commitment to our own well-being means that we pay less attention to the well-being of others? If we have to make some sacrifices to support the well-being of others, are there ways to make those sacrifices that don't require us to suffer needlessly, or is that sometimes the wrong question?

After all, to go back to the white supremacy example, white people in white supremacist societies benefit from being white precisely because people of color in such societies suffer from, for lack of a better way to put it, not being white. Some of my flourishing is built on the suffering of people of color. Perhaps building a society in which people of color are finally fully free to flourish and supported in doing so will lead to a little suffering on the part of white people. And perhaps that is not a terrible thing, even if by some accounts that suffering is avoidable. Sometimes we may use our freedom to choose to be a little less free in order to support the freedom of others. Sometimes our comfort is less important than the safety of others. To the extent that we are committed to the well-being of all people, we will learn to sort out what that means of us at different points in time and in different situations.

While my approach to ethics has additional components, this seems like a good stopping point. I'd love to hear your thoughts about these ideas, your questions, your concerns, your

disagreements, and your additional insights. We'll talk for about 20 minutes and then I will consider some ways in which this approach to ethics fits with basic progressive Christian values, understandings, and commitments.

A Progressive Christian Ethic of Flourishing

When I first began working on this ethical project, I saw it as secular. Over the last couple of years, it has become clear to me that this is in fact a progressive Christian project in which the Kin-dom of God can be understood as a realm of human and planetary flourishing, and in which Jesus's command to love God, our neighbors, ourselves and our enemies is a command to support their and our flourishing along with the flourishing of creation. As such, this ethical project does not merely call for humane politics, it also offers a spiritual invitation to people of progressive faith. I'd like to use the rest of this talk to suggest some ways that my project fits into and supports a progressive Christian framework.

Let's start with some Biblical passages that point toward flourishing as a prophetic value, show that Jesus was concerned with flourishing even if he did not use the term, and suggest that some early Jesus communities were similarly invested in human well-being.

Isaiah 2:4: They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Micah 4:4: Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid.

Micah 6:8: [God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Holy require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Mark 2:27: Then [Jesus] said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath...'

Mark 12:28-34a: One of the scribes asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said... "to love [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbor as oneself" - this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'

Matthew 25:35-40: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and

welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Luke 4:16-19, 21: When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’...Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”

John 10:10: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Acts 4:32, 34-35: Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

James 2:15-18: If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead...Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

1 John 4:8: But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Here are three quotes from contemporary progressive Christians that point in the same direction:

You have been waiting for God, [Jesus] said, while God has been waiting for you. No wonder nothing is happening. You want God’s intervention, he said, while God wants your collaboration. God’s [kin-dom] is here, but only insofar as you accept it, enter it, live it, and thereby establish it. (John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable*, 2012, p. 127)

I think about the life of Jesus and how it seems that every time Jesus has the chance to put rules, regulations, interpretations, or anything else above his relationship with a person, he always chooses the person. When put to task about what the “greatest commandment” is, he points toward two relationships: the love between God and people, and the love between two people. (Brian Hehn, 2019 email from the Hymn Society in the US and Canada)

I believe God is that essence in us that reaches out to another, committed to their well-being, their enlightenment, their moral, emotional, relational, and spiritual growth. (Phillip Gulley, *Unlearning God*, 2018, pp. 193-194)

Finally, here is the current vision statement of my congregation, Vista Grande Community Church United Church of Christ:

We covenant together to imagine and live into a world where God's Kin-dom vision of human and planetary flourishing comes to pass through the work of love, justice, peace, equality, and extravagant hospitality. We envision nothing less than a world restored to wholeness, wellness, joy, and gratitude for all of God's Creation.

What can we learn from these Biblical texts and these contemporary progressive Christian voices? I believe they suggest some ways in which the ethic of flourishing that I described above connects with Jesus's vision and program. This connection in turn suggests how those of us who try to follow in the way of Jesus might seek to live.

Jesus's two great commandments are not about principles but about our obligation to love. If the greatest commandment is to love the Holy, and the commandment that follows from it is to love our neighbors as ourselves, which means loving ourselves first, and if the commandment to love is extended by Jesus even to our enemies, what does that say about Jesus's values and vision? It says that love is at the heart of Jesus's understanding. It's not that principles and religious practices are unimportant. It's that we follow those principles and observe those religious practices in the service of love.

When Jesus said that the sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath, we can hear this as a kind of precursor to the idea that the point of principles is human flourishing, that principles are means to the end of actual people getting to have good lives.

Jesus's commitment to valuing people, healing them, feeding them, teaching them, and keeping an open table that broke down status hierarchies shows his commitment to human well-being. We can similarly go about valuing people, supporting and advocating for their healing, feeding the hungry, sharing Jesus's ideas, and practicing extravagant hospitality today.

Jesus was able to engage with people as individuals while recognizing both their social locations and their common humanity. In this sense, Jesus had a complex understanding of who people were, what they needed, and why it was God's will that they should have access to abundant lives free of violence. If we agree that God, however we understand God, would want all people to have access to abundant lives free of violence, we can work to build just such a world today.

Jesus did not originate either this way of thinking about people or this valuing of human well-being. Rather, he followed in the prophetic Jewish tradition from which he emerged. The prophetic tradition stresses justice, good treatment of the poor, peacemaking, and taking care of the orphan, widow, and other disempowered people. These prophetic values are in keeping with an ethical commitment to enabling all people to have good lives. Our justice-focused activism and advocacy continues the prophets' work in our time.

And, of course, additional insights from contemporary progressive Christianity lend themselves even further to centering flourishing as a progressive Christian ethical priority with implications for how we live.

For example, Carter Heyward, Marvin Ellison, Jim Burklo, and other progressive Christians have understood sacred power as the power of justice-love, the power of right relationship, or the power of mutuality. God is made manifest, incarnated, and enfleshed today in our lives, our work, and our relationships. We carry out “goddling” in the world when we care for others as though Jesus lived in them; we continue Jesus’s Kin-dom building work when we act from a commitment to justice-love and when we practice mutuality and right relationship with ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies. Cornel West famously said that justice is what love looks like in public; one could also think of justice as the work we do to love people we will never meet.

This progressive Christian way of thinking about the sacred, the sacred spark in us, and the sacred work we must do, can also be understood in terms of the centrality of flourishing. What, after all, is the point of justice-love? The point of right relationship? The point of mutuality? Why do these values and practices matter? They matter because, if lived out and lived into assiduously, they lead to human and planetary flourishing. If sacred power can be understood (for example), as the power of justice-love, it can also be understood as the power of flourishing. As the early church leader St. Irenaeus of Lyons put it, though I have modified his sexist language a bit, “the glory of God is humanity fully alive.” From a contemporary progressive Christian perspective, we could say that the glory of God is humanity fully flourishing.

We could also consider the relationship between love and flourishing in light of these strands of Biblical tradition and more recent progressive Christian language. With this relationship in mind, here is Phillip Gulley’s quote again:

“I believe God is that essence in us that reaches out to another, committed to their well-being, their enlightenment, their moral, emotional, relational, and spiritual growth.”

Following Gulley, we might say that love is made manifest in the work we do and the relationships that we build in support of our own flourishing and the flourishing of others. If “God is love” and love partakes of the holy, then the work we do for our own flourishing and for the flourishing of others is holy work.

If, as I suggested above, avoidable suffering is in a sense the opposite of flourishing, if it blocks or damages or cuts into flourishing, then the work we do to mitigate our own avoidable suffering and the avoidable suffering of others is also holy work.

Loving God with all our being means working to enable God’s creation to flourish. That creation includes all human beings and the natural world, not least because humans cannot ultimately flourish when the planet is suffering. We can find this claim to be compelling regardless of our understanding of who or what exactly God is or how exactly God works.

Loving our neighbors as ourselves starts with loving ourselves, which means working for our own flourishing – physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, and in all other ways.

Loving our neighbors as ourselves means working for the flourishing of our neighbors. I presume that this means all of our neighbors without exception. The question, “Who is my

neighbor?” as asked of Jesus was not meant to gain clarification or to parse definitions, it was meant to buy the questioner an out. Jesus did not provide an out in his answer. We don’t get one either. All people are potentially our neighbors.

Our neighbors may be those who show us mercy, as the parable of the good Samaritan indicates, but a contextual, historically sensitive reading of the parable reminds us that the phrase “good Samaritan” essentially means “merciful enemy.” If we are to be good Samaritans today, we are called to show our enemies mercy – which means wishing for them to flourish and working for their flourishing when and where their flourishing is not at our expense.

Jesus’s invitation and demand to love our enemies is so radical precisely because, if we truly love our enemies, they are no longer our enemies. If we genuinely want our enemies to flourish, we may still be their enemies, but the reverse, in an important sense, is no longer the case. The progressive Christian band Gungor put it this way in one of their songs: “...if it’s us or them, it’s us for them.”

Even liberation theology’s central insight about God having a “preferential option for the poor” can be understood in the context of flourishing and avoidable suffering. Anyone who suffers unnecessarily or is blocked from flourishing because they belong to a socially, culturally, religiously, or economically devalued group must receive priority care and priority justice so their avoidable suffering is mitigated and their flourishing is enabled as quickly and completely as possible. To pick a current application of this idea: saying that #blacklivesmatter is not claiming that other lives don’t matter, it is claiming that in white supremacist societies, black lives actually don’t matter and so we, especially those of us who are white, need to demand that black lives matter and make them matter and treat them as mattering.

What, then, are we called to do? We are to feed the hungry, free the prisoner, tend to the least valued in society, and support the sick. We are to throw feasts and invite everyone. We are to do whatever psychological and spiritual work we need to do to understand and accept that we ourselves are loved, lovable, and loving, whatever our frailties and challenges. We are to tend to our own flourishing – physically, emotionally, socially, morally, and in all other ways. We are to tend to each other’s flourishing – physically, emotionally, socially, morally, and in all other ways. We are to remake society so that every single last person has a real chance to flourish – physically, emotionally, socially, morally, and in all other ways. We are to care for creation so that all non-human beings have a chance to flourish in whatever context that is possible for them.

And we are to do all of this in memory of Jesus, because this work is our best understanding of what he would have wanted. We are to be Jesus in the world today. This is a daunting demand, so we gather to help each other remember this demand and practice living it out. We gather to support each other and cheer each other on, and to help each other when we are suffering. The details of the work of flourishing are specific to our time and the language we use to talk about how to do this work is similarly contemporary, but the value behind this work – the vision behind this work – is nothing less than the Kingdom of God as Jesus imagined it.

If progressive Christians are to take up an ethic of flourishing as a moral and spiritual demand, we will need to revisit our individual spiritual lives, our communal religious lives, and more.

What implications does an ethic of flourishing have for our individual self-care, for our spiritual and psychological development? What implications does it have for our collective justice work, our struggles for peace, and our environmental activism? What implications might it have for our liturgical practices? For our interfaith commitments? The possibilities are endless.

Taking up and living out an ethic of flourishing can ultimately be understood as a particular way of following Jesus, a path involving both deep joy and substantial self-sacrifice as we cultivate delight and strenuously develop such virtues as courage, generosity, humility, compassion, and, of course, love. Perhaps such an ethic, if taken seriously by enough people, would contribute to moving all of us and our planet toward a life more abundant than we can imagine today. It's hard to know, but I remain hopeful even in these profoundly challenging times. After all, as we have been taught, nothing is impossible with love.

I've talked long enough. What questions or thoughts or objections or hopes does this inspire in you?