

Ethics for the Beloved Community: Toward a Kin-dom of Flourishing

Amanda Udis-Kessler, unpublished essay, May 9, 2021

Some years ago, I began developing what I called an ethics of flourishing. This project started as a secular, sociologically driven project but has since transformed into a progressive Christian project. This document begins with an update of my 2015 presentation introducing the main concepts (part 1), and continues with some of my more recent insights about how this is in fact a progressive Christian ethical project (part 2). This document is far from complete, but captures most of the main ethical ideas, however briefly.

Part 1: The modified original presentation, titled, “Human Flourishing and Social Inequality”

This essay proposes a way of thinking about why social inequality is morally wrong that I have not heard articulated this way before. It begins with this set of questions: Why do we care so much about human rights? Equality? Justice? Freedom? Economic efficiency? Why do they matter? We usually talk about these values as being ends in themselves, but I think they can be better understood as means to an end. That end is human flourishing, human thriving, human well-being. What is the value of liberty, for example? We need it in order to have good lives; if our lives are too constrained, we cannot flourish. Why does equality matter? Because without it, only some of us get to have good lives. This essay sets up some assumptions that need to be in place for us to treat human flourishing as a moral end in itself that would merit extremely high priority in ethical decision-making, and touches on what flourishing has to do with social inequality.

After a recent mass shooting, commentator Joe “The Plumber” Wurzelbacher wrote, in reference to gun control, “Your dead kids don’t trump my constitutional rights.” An ethics of human flourishing says that Joe is wrong, that everyone ought to get to have a good life and that this priority trumps virtually all principles, abstractions, and institutions when it’s time to make a moral decision. Consider the Defense of Marriage Act. Marriage is an institution. It doesn’t have a heart that can be broken, but same-sex couples who can’t legally marry may well have broken hearts. Then there’s the right of gun ownership without restrictions. Some people guard this right as fiercely as they would their own child. But their own child could be shot to death by someone who should never have had access to a gun but who did. In both of these cases, an ethics of flourishing says that it is of the highest priority that two people in love be able to marry, and that children get to grow up without fear of being shot. Protecting marriage, whatever that even means, is of lower priority, as is the right to have a gun with no restrictions.

An ethics of flourishing puts the lived experience of people ahead of theories, principles, and even certain values. We can talk all day about liberty, equal rights, and so on, but unless these concepts are grounded in actual human lives, they are meaningless, and can be used to cause harm as easily as they can be used to cause good. We must start with actual experiences, and with the priority of maximizing flourishing and minimizing suffering in those actual experiences. From this perspective, most immoral acts are immoral because they block or damage flourishing and cause suffering. An ethics of flourishing draws on consequentialism in its concern for maximizing the good. But it is not merely about the greatest possible number of people flourishing; it is about everyone being treated in ways that support flourishing. In this sense, an

ethics of flourishing is also deontological, even Kantian. An ethics of flourishing is also of necessity a virtue ethics, since it invites us both to seek out our own well-being and to cultivate traits and virtues in ourselves that help us seek and work toward the flourishing of others. Finally, an ethics of flourishing is sociologically grounded both in its understanding of humanity and in its understanding of social inequality and how such inequality interferes with well-being and causes suffering. (I return to the question of suffering later in the essay, after I have laid out a preliminary understanding of what it means to flourish.)

Considering human flourishing begins with the question of what it means to be human. I'll propose three general ways of answering this question, all of which have implications for human well-being. First, we are not merely individuals and we are not merely human beings in an overarching sense. We are certainly individuals; we have different experiences and make sense of them in different ways. And we are certainly human beings in that we all share certain needs and gifts. We must not forget either of these aspects of being human. But we are simultaneously also all members of social groups. We are grouped depending on whether we are male or female or genderqueer; we are grouped according to our skin color and other biological markers that are given social significance. We are grouped according to the gender or genders to which we are attracted. We are grouped according to how much money we make and how much wealth we have, and we are grouped in many other ways. Being different from one another in our group identities would not be an issue if not for the fact that we are also either valued or devalued depending on certain types of group identities that we have, and being valued or devalued impacts our ability to flourish. For example, women are much more likely to be raped than men, and LGBTQ people are much more likely to be beaten up than heterosexuals, and both the fear of violence and the experience of it interfere with flourishing in these cases. Devalued groups include women, LGBTQ people, people of color, poor people, religious minorities, people with disabilities, and Latin American immigrants, whether documented or not. There are many other devalued groups that we could consider, and of course intersectionality means that each of us has a mix of identities; for many of us, some of these are valued and some are devalued.

It's also important to be clear that we are *simultaneously* individuals, human beings in a general sense, and members of social groups, that all of these three facets of humanity are always true though they may be more or less salient at different moments in our lives. As I write these words, I am particularly conscious of being an individual with particular experiences, interests, skills, and creative projects (particularly my passion for thinking about ethics in this way.) At the same time, I have a human body, human emotions, and human needs, and any of those might impose themselves on me and interrupt my writing. I also belong to various social groups, some valued and some devalued; while my whiteness means that a police officer is not likely to pull me over if I go for a drive and I speed, my queerness means that there is at least one church within a mile of where I live in Colorado Springs (the "Evangelical Vatican" of the US) that believes me to be inherently immoral and dangerous and that encourages its members to vote against my well-being.

It can be hard to hold together the complexity that we are simultaneously individuals, human beings, and members of social groups, but when someone is treated in a way that ignores any of these aspects of being human, the treatment in question can block flourishing and cause suffering. Being treated as a member of a group instead of as an individual, especially a member

of a devalued group, can lead to all kinds of prejudice and discrimination, what I often call “bad-faith treatment” or being denied the benefit of the doubt. Being treated as an individual when one is a member of a devalued group has some benefits, but it means one’s challenges as a member of the devalued group are ignored and one’s description of one’s own life is probably not being taken seriously. When someone fails to treat someone else as a human being, we call that dehumanization and history shows how often it ends in suffering and even death. We cannot understand either human well-being or human suffering without having some grasp of these different aspects of being a person.

We might even say that these three aspects of being a person – being a human being, being an individual, and being a member of social groups – also inform what it means for us to flourish. This may be most obvious in terms of our individuality; to flourish as individuals, we have to have a certain degree of autonomy and freedom to make our own choices. Too much constriction of that autonomy and freedom can lead to suffering. (It is also true that if we prioritize our own freedom to do whatever we want regardless of the consequences, we may cause others unnecessary suffering, as we see in our society’s unwillingness to more effectively restrict gun access and use. Thus, while we need freedom to flourish, we ought to voluntarily restrict our own freedom in certain ways so that others can flourish.)

Is it the case that one can flourish as a member of a social group? Certainly, one can suffer as a member of a social group, as we know from the impact of white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and other forms of inequality on devalued communities. Members of devalued social groups suffer from not being given the benefit of the doubt and being treated badly, individually, culturally, and institutionally. Members of valued groups benefit from good-faith, benefit of the doubt treatment, and thus have access to some of the goods, opportunities, and experiences that aid in flourishing. As we get to the list of human traits that must be supported for human flourishing, we will notice how many of those traits are supported for members of socially, politically, and culturally valued groups.

That said, even those who benefit from inequality are denied some of the blessings of flourishing. White people, for instance, have certain freedoms and access to certain opportunities under white supremacy, but we are never truly emotionally free as long as our well-being is tied to the suffering of people of color. Some combination of fear, defensiveness, resentment, guilt, anger, and sadness are likely to be working in us as long as we benefit unjustly from racial inequality and racist devaluation of others. Until and unless we are actively working for the well-being of members of devalued racial groups, we are not truly free to flourish as white people.

What does it mean to flourish as a human being? There are certain aspects of humanity that matter because they need to be supported for someone to be able to flourish. Here are a few examples from a much longer list:

- We can only experience reality by interpreting it; to flourish we need access to interpretations of reality in which we are valued and valuable people
- We are embodied and for that reason are vulnerable to illness and injury; at the same time our embodiment allows us to experience great joy and agency through our bodies. To flourish we need access to healthcare and freedom from violence and environmentally related harm; we also need access to the many ways we might enjoy life as embodied beings

- We are socialized to see the world in certain ways; to flourish we need to live in societies where we are valued and others are as well so that we can and want to contribute to our well-being and the well-being of others
- We are volitional in that we want and desire things; to flourish we need access to at least some of the things we want or we will receive the message that we are not worthy of having what society considers good
- We are group-centered in that we identify with particular groups of people, from our families to our communities to other types of groups; to flourish, we must have access to the groups that are meaningful to us and not be cast out of them or shunned by them
- We have creative and artistic capabilities; to flourish we need access to the creativity of others so that it might enrich our lives, and we need time and space to be creative ourselves
- Similarly, we have the capacity to be playful; to flourish we need time, space, and opportunities to play, relax, and laugh, and we need to be free enough from danger that we can set our minds to joy
- Our emotions are central to our lives; to flourish we need to be free from emotional harm and able to live our emotional lives fully so that we can be joyful when we are joyful, grieve when we experience loss, be angry at injustice and otherwise be the emotional beings we are
- Finally, we are shaped by our memories; to flourish we must have enough access to a good life and enough freedom from fear and harm that our memories do not traumatize us and, moreover, that they solidify our sense of being good people with lives of blessing

There's one more important aspect of what it means to be a human being that has implications for thriving, which is that we are simultaneously independent, dependent, and interdependent.

- We are independent in that we make our own decisions to at least some degree and our ability to thrive relies on our capacity to control at least some aspects of our lives.
- We are dependent in that we rely on the planet for air and the work of other people for food, water, our possessions, specialized attention such as medical care, a sense of meaning, and the experience of love. Who we are has a lot to do with how we've been raised to make sense of the world, and it is always other human beings who, through our interactions with them, bring us into community and give our lives purpose. Our dependence means that we can only thrive if others treat us well and support our well-being, and further that we can only thrive if we can trust others to treat us well (otherwise our level of fear and anxiety will make flourishing impossible).
- We are interdependent in that we make attachments and promises to others and they to us; we build communities and society together; each of us did, or will, contribute to the world we live in unless prevented from doing so. We don't merely need others; they need us as well, for love and care and all the things that go into enabling society to exist and keep existing on a day-to-day basis. Our interdependence means that when we are socially separated from others, through inequality or for other reasons, we all suffer even if some suffer more, and all of us are limited in our ability to flourish.

Given these aspects of being human, what does it mean to flourish? This is at best a very preliminary definition but it captures some important elements. To flourish is to be able to be and become our whole best selves, to be able to fulfill our potential, to enjoy the good things of life, and to contribute effectively to both our own well-being and that of other people. To flourish is to experience pleasure and to be the source of other people's pleasure. We can flourish

physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. To use traditionally religious language, flourishing is about being blessed by others and being a blessing to them.

What, then, do we need to flourish? What are the preconditions that allow us lives of well-being? Here are some preliminary answers:

- We need access to basic survival resources such as air, food, water, shelter, rest, healthcare, education, work and sufficient money to live, and access to the political system in order to play a role in directing it toward our flourishing and the flourishing of others.
- We need freedom from fear as a defining factor of our lives, which means we need freedom from negative, violent, and dangerous experiences and situations including mistreatment by individuals, groups, and institutions in the forms of prejudice and discrimination. We also need to be free from the self-hatred often experienced by devalued social groups, and from the kinds of self-destruction that can accompany such self-hatred. In short, we need a certain degree of physical, emotional, and spiritual safety to flourish.
- We need access to socially valued goods, experiences, and opportunities, what we consider the good things in life. These might include higher education that is not merely about getting a job but that whets our imaginations and strengthens our capacities; access to work that does not merely pay our bills but is meaningful; access to creative activities and time to be creative; the ability to do things for pleasure and entertainment.
- We need access to self-determination of beliefs, values, and action in order to make choices about our own lives that will allow us to flourish. This requirement turns out to be complicated once we add the claim that we should be concerned about the well-being of others, not just ourselves, because the moral thing to do may turn out to be to limit our freedom in the service of others' well-being sometimes; nonetheless, we need the freedom to make that decision ourselves.
- Finally, we only have access to basic survival resources, freedom from negative experiences, access to the good things in life, and a degree of freedom if we are valued and respected by others, taken seriously, and treated with dignity and worth. Put differently, we won't flourish unless others support our flourishing.

An ethics of flourishing also, of necessity, addresses suffering in that it claims that unnecessary suffering is a moral problem, one that we ought to assuage. There is a distinction between the suffering that comes with flourishing and the avoidable suffering that damages or blocks flourishing. As an example, part of being a human being is that we all have beloved family members die, which causes us emotional suffering. The very fact that we grieve their deaths, however, may say something about the love we shared with them, love that enriched our flourishing. That said, white people, especially wealthy white people in the US, don't tend to have beloved family members die unnecessarily at the hands of the police, nor do we who are white and well-off tend to see the reputations of our dead beloved family members smeared all over the media, nor can we be almost completely sure that the police officer responsible for the killing will be let off the hook and not held responsible, which will be devastating to us.

As the First Noble Truth of the Buddha says, life is full of dissatisfaction, probably a better translation than "suffering." Again, however, we ought to be discerning about when suffering can be avoided or prevented, and we ought to be committed to struggling against unnecessary suffering. There are questions we can ask about different actions and ethical priorities along

these lines: Does this action, priority, or value increase flourishing, and for whom? Does it increase suffering, and for whom? Are some people benefitting from other people's suffering? If so, is this outcome really morally acceptable? If it is not morally acceptable, how can we change it?

These questions bring us directly to the matter of social inequality. It's tempting to say that social inequality is a moral problem because it limits the freedom of devalued people, or because it interferes with equality or civil rights or justice or even, as some economists have suggested, because it interferes with the free working of the market. But again, if one claims, as I have, that these things are means to an end then social inequality is a moral problem for a different reason: it damages and limits human flourishing, causes human suffering, and in the worst cases leads to dehumanization that can end in death. After all, perhaps one of the most important elements of devaluing or dehumanizing someone due to their group identity is the failure to care whether they flourish or suffer (which can lead to the desire that they suffer and the willingness to inflict suffering on them).

Here are some examples of the relationship between inequality and flourishing or suffering, based on the ideas presented above:

- When a person is treated, not as the complex human being they are, but only as a member of a devalued group, they may find themselves living in fear of prejudice, discrimination, or violence, and experiencing these kinds of mistreatment.
- When a person is treated strictly as an individual despite belonging to a devalued social group, the reality of their experiences with devaluation and their need for others with whom to struggle against the devaluation may be ignored.
- Dehumanization can have horrific individual and collective outcomes, many of which we've seen historically and still see around us today.
- Considering the abbreviated list of traits that make us human, when someone belongs to a devalued group, the needs that come with these traits – the need for our bodies to be free from harm and to be sources of pleasure, the need for meaning systems that tell us we are valuable, the need for access to our groups, the need for creativity and play, the need to live our emotional lives freely and without harm, and the need to build positive memories, among others – may all be ignored or even purposely subverted.
- Members of devalued groups may lose the freedom to live in certain ways, or may find that their dependence on others comes at a cost, or may find the interdependence built into our social contracts to be tenuous and frail.
- Members of devalued groups may not have complete access to basic survival resources or to the good things in life, may live in fear of and indeed experience negative, violent, and dangerous situations and, as already noted, may be denied a variety of freedoms.
- Members of devalued groups may learn self-hatred and self-destructive behaviors; if society does not support their well-being, why should they?
- A member of a devalued group, just by virtue of being devalued, may be allowed to suffer or made to suffer by members of valued groups.
- Finally, the prejudice and mistreatment visited on members of devalued groups hurts members of valued groups as well, and in a variety of ways. Once members of a social group have been devalued and dehumanized, members of valued groups may respond to the devalued group with fear and be unable to make meaningful connections with them. This can

impact family relationships and friendships. For example, when an LGBTQ person comes out to a homophobic family member, their relationship may be damaged or even destroyed, which exacerbates suffering for both people. At a larger level, when groups of people fear or dislike each other each group is less able to learn about the other group and benefit from its gifts. And belonging to a valued group can cause suffering if the social expectations about what it means to be part of that group are harmful. If being a “real man” requires suppressing emotions, taking dangerous risks, or being violent, for example, expectations of masculinity cause suffering even if masculinity is more socially valued than femininity.

[While not addressed in the original presentation, this approach to ethics has policy implications as well as spiritual growth, activism and justice work implications even in its secular version.]

Part 2: Additional insights about how this approach to ethics is tied to, and can ground, progressive Christian ways of being in the world

As noted above, my work on the ethics of flourishing began as a secular project. As I have become more deeply engaged with the UCC and engaged more deeply with my passion for Jesus’s vision of Beloved Community/Love’s Domain/the Kin-dom of God, I’ve realized that it is possible to conceive of Jesus’s vision of the Kin-dom as, in essence, a community or society of flourishing, or at least one where human flourishing is understood as being important to God.

The following Biblical passages point in toward flourishing as a prophetic value and one in keeping with Jesus’s vision and that of some early followers. The italics are my addition.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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.* (Isaiah 2:4)

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

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8) [I interpret this as meaning that a flourishing society will be built on justice, kindness, and humility.]

Then he said to them, ‘*The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath...*’ (Mark 2:27)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he 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 that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; and “to love him 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.’ (Mark 12:28-34a) [I discuss this passage below.]

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for *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.*” (Matthew 25:34-40)

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 and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. (Luke 4:16-20a)

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

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. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet. (Acts 4:32, 34-37)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? *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.* But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. (James 2:14-18)

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

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, email from the Center for Congregational Song/Hymn Society in the US and Canada)

The writer M. Scott Peck defined love as one's commitment to the growth of the beloved. When love is understood that way, we begin to understand the nature of God. 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 the congregation to which I belong:

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. (Vista Grande Community Church UCC vision statement, adopted April 13, 2020)

I am still working out in a detailed way how the above ethics of flourishing is tied to Jesus's vision and program and to what his followers should do today. The rest of this document captures some initial thoughts about the connection.

First, Jesus's commitment to valuing people, healing them, feeding them, teaching them, and keeping an open table that broke down status hierarchies shows a commitment on his part to human flourishing as I have described it above.

Second, 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.

Third, 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 (at times; this is a complicated issue), 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.

If, in fact, it is possible to find in the Biblical tradition voices that advocate for what we might today call human flourishing, more recent insights from contemporary progressive Christianity

lend themselves even further to centering flourishing as a progressive Christian ethical priority with implications for how we live. The Phillip Gulley quote above is particularly helpful here.

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 (with sexist language modified), “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 values. For example, and again keeping Phillip Gulley’s quote in mind, 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.

Consider the two great commandments, included above (from Mark 12:28-34a). How might we read that passage in terms of flourishing?

- 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 exactly who or what God is or exactly how God works.
- Loving our neighbors as ourselves starts with loving ourselves, which means working for our own flourishing – physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, and in 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.

- Our neighbors may be those who show us mercy, as the Good Samaritan parable indicates, but a contextual, historically sensitive reading of the parable reminds us that the phrase “good Samaritan” essentially means “good 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/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. As the progressive Christian band Gungor put it in their song “Us for Them,” “...if it’s us or them, it’s us for them.”
- Liberation theology’s insight about God’s 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 (“the poor” in our day) must receive priority care and priority justice so their avoidable suffering is mitigated and their flourishing is enabled as quickly and fully as possible. To pick a current application of this idea: claiming that #blacklivesmatter is not claiming other lives don’t matter, it is claiming that in our white supremacist society, black lives really don’t matter and so we (especially we who are white) need to demand that they matter and make them matter and treat them as mattering – not to the exclusion of other devalued groups, but because African Americans are an important subgroup of “the poor” of today’s United States whose flourishing is God’s preferential option.

Lifting up an ethics of flourishing as a moral and spiritual demand made of progressive Christians would obviously have implications for our just peace and environmental work in the world, but it also would also have implications for our self-care, for our personal spiritual development and psychological healing, for our worship and liturgical practices, for our faith formation processes (including our engagement with the Bible), for our interfaith commitments, and for all the things we do as progressive Christian communities. To think out these implications more fully would require engaging with our complicated identities as human beings, group members, and individuals, as well as understanding both the sociological and the Christian implications of our independence, dependence, and interdependence. I believe this approach to ethics offers us rich opportunities for discernment, moral development, and service to the world and look forward to developing these ideas more fully in conversation with others.