

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2015

What Does Loving Your Neighbor Mean?

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September 6, 2015

James 2:1-10, 14-17 Mark 7:24-37

Our scripture reading from James is very powerful and strikes right at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Christ's second great commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself, but do we do that? Do most people do that? I suggest that many, if not most, people do not.

The scripture reading gives the examples of deference being given to someone dressed in fine clothes and jewels being given preference over someone who is poor. The reference is to where people sit in the synagogue but it happens today time and again in how some people are treated by others.

People are shunned or ignored because they are poor or because they have a different skin color or speak a different language or dress differently. We tend to try to ignore people who are different from what we perceive is the norm of our particular culture or do our best to avoid them.

Be honest with yourself. Do you give a group of youth of another race a wide berth when you see them on the street? Do you look away when encountering a beggar on the street? When you see a homeless person sleeping in a doorway or on a park bench, do you simply walk by? Do you feel a bit of anger if you see a woman wearing a hijab or a burka? Would it bother you if an African American family moved into your neighborhood? What about a Hispanic family or a Muslim family?

I suspect that if each of us were totally honest, one of more of these examples would strike home, at least a little bit. We may not intend to react in this way to others, but all of us tend to be far more comfortable in the company of people who are "like us". We give preference to those of the same race and social class as we are and we give deference to those who are better off than we are. That is human nature --- but it isn't Christian --- it is contrary to what Jesus taught us.

But even Jesus may have fallen into this trap. His human nature at times overshadowed his Godly nature as evidenced by our reading from Mark. A Gentile woman, a Syrophenician, asked Jesus to cure her daughter and Jesus expressed

reluctance to do so saying, “... *it is not right to take children’s bread and toss it to dogs.*” The Gentile woman and her daughter had a lower social standing than did the Jews that Jesus felt he had come to serve and Jesus’ human nature seems to have reacted accordingly. The most perfect person who ever walked this earth reacted, at least briefly, in a manner contrary to his own commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

As a pastor, every time I read this particular passage from Mark, I am extremely bothered by it. This woman was not a Jew and Jesus reacts very sharply to her request. Jews were the favored members of the society in which Jesus lived and served, just as we white middle-class Anglo-Saxon Christians are favored members of the society in which we live. Those are facts of Jesus’ life and our life.

The woman responds to Jesus by saying, “...*even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*” She doesn’t argue the question of Jewish priority, but instead she reminds Jesus of the inclusion of Gentiles.

As Walter Bruggeman, et al.¹ said, “*The woman’s acceptance of her status as a non-Jew presents a beautiful contrast to the Pharisees who demand a tight adherence to the Jewish structure of religion. She begs only for what is due her as a needy being. On the other hand, her ‘pushiness’ provides the church with a clear mandate beyond the bounds of Judaism, a mandate wrenched from the earthly Jesus himself ...*”.

The second part of our reading from the Gospel of Mark is very different. It dwells on the healing of another outsider by Jesus, this time a deaf man who also was a Gentile. Never having been able to hear, the man could hardly talk. Not only did Jesus cure his deafness, he also enabled the man to speak clearly.

But how was this man brought to Jesus’ attention? It was because a group of people saw the man’s plight, took him to Jesus, and begged Jesus to help him. These people did not walk past the deaf man and ignore his plight.

Last spring there was a news article about Charles Gladden who worked as a janitor at the Dirksen Senate Office Building. He worked for the most powerful people in the country yet he was homeless. He slept on the sidewalk next to a DC Metro station. Each morning he would go to the Capitol, wash up in a restroom as best he could, and go to work. No one knew that he was homeless. Senators and Congress members interfaced with Mr. Gladden daily, did not know that he was homeless, and were totally oblivious to the fact that the United States Senate did not pay him a living wage. He was

invisible to the Senators just as the needy and downtrodden have become nearly invisible to most of us.

Mr. Gladden couldn't afford even a modest home because his children and grandchildren were also needy and he gave them much of his meager earnings to help them.

Because of social media, Mr. Gladden's plight was made known to the country. He said, "Our lawmakers, they don't even realize what's going on right beneath their feet. They don't have a clue.

"They scramble around for issues to talk about. All they have to do is stop and ask the common person on the street ... or in the building, the people bringing them their food, people sweeping and cleaning their toilet."

We need to look around at those who are less fortunate than we are or who are shunned by society. We need to reach out to them and not put on blinders and ignore them or walk around them.

Jesus fell into this trap with the Syrophenician woman and her needs but he awoke to those needs as did the people who brought the deaf man to him.

Love your neighbor as yourself doesn't mean the neighbor who is of the same social class as we are --- it means everyone --- the poor, those of another race or ethnic group, and those of another religion.

If Jesus could react as he initially did to the Syrophenician woman, is it any wonder that sinners like all of us can react in the same way. We can and must put the second great commandment foremost in our minds as we interface with other people no matter who they are.

I greatly admire Pope Francis and the actions he has been taking to bring the Roman Catholic Church into the 21st Century. Recently he was quoted on Facebook as saying, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. This is how prayer works." One person who saw that post responded asking why you should bother to pray if you are going to feed them anyway.

Our daughter Karen who works at the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Prescott, AZ responded to that comment this way:

"Prayer does not absolve us of physical action. We were made in the image of God, and anything we ask of Him, we should also ourselves do, as much as we are able in our limited physical form.

“Prayer is also not limited to this very moment in time. You pray for whatever happened that led this person to hunger; you pray for his current situation to resolve; you pray for his future to be more certain; you pray for his overall health, and his family. You give thanks that, although he is in need of food, he has other blessings in his life. You give thanks that you yourself are not hungry, and are in a position of such plenty that you can help him today. You pray that others along his path will also treat him with compassion. You pray that other people will not feel the hunger he is feeling. Et cetera.

“Whether or not you believe in God, to feel gratitude for the good things in life - your own life or someone else's - and to feel hopeful that the difficult things will be borne with grace until they are no longer difficult for the bearer, are very basic, compassionate responses. So yes, feed him today as you're able, and also pray for him, or hold him in the light, or visualize him in a more stable situation, or whatever it is that you are able to do with belief in your heart.

“Even if you don't think doing that will have any long-term impact, you still can see the immediate effect of him and on you: He experiences that someone else - often a complete stranger - sees him a real person, and recognizes his plight deeply enough to stop for a moment and spend that moment in care of him. His heart will be touched and he will have a sense, possibly for the first time in a long time, that people do see him, and that he matters. And for you, it lets you be more in-the-moment, compassionate, kind, loving, and grateful for your own abundance. It lets you step outside yourself for a few moments and stand entirely in the space of loving another person and considering what it's like to be that person, and what you can do to make his life a little gentler.

“So yes. Pray for him, and then feed him, and then find someone else who is hungry.”

Amen

1. Walter Bruggeman, et al, Texts for Preaching, Year B, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1993.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011.