

Baptism Series #5: Loving others as ourselves requires practical skills in how to seek and serve Christ in them

Sunday, Feb. 4, 2018

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Sermon Text(s): Baptismal Covenant Question #4, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

This week, we'll be looking at the fourth question in our Baptismal Covenant:

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

The way this question is worded gives us something of a definition of what it means to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” In order to do this, we must do two things: seek Christ in all persons, and serve Christ in all persons.

To seek Christ in all persons is to approach each person you meet with the same respect and honor you would give Jesus Christ himself. Benedictine monasteries have an instruction in their Rule of Life that says: “Let all guests who arrive be received as Christ.” God chose to become incarnate in Jesus; he chose to speak to us in the form of another human being. The Benedictines remind us that the opportunity to encounter Christ in another person wasn't limited to those who lived during the first century when the historical Jesus was among us.

To serve Christ in all persons is to treat others with the same loving care and kindness as Jesus treated others. It is to remember that our primary relationship to other human beings is not one of control or domination, but of service. Jesus said he came “not to be served, but to serve,”¹ and that is how we should approach our relationships with other people.

Several of our scriptures today speak to this theme of service. Paul talks about making himself a “slave to all,” living and acting as others do in order to meet them where they are so he can more effectively share the message of God’s love with them. His primary tool of evangelism is service. And Peter’s mother-in-law, in today’s Gospel reading, understands that the appropriate response to receiving God’s healing grace is grateful service. After Jesus “took her by the hand and lifted her up, [...] the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”²

Contrary to the way this passage has been read by patriarchal culture, this was not about the disciples wanting this woman to be healed so she could “wait on them,” as the translation in the NIV (New International Version) says. Modern women often dismiss Peter’s mother-in-law as a cultural stereotype. More than once I’ve heard women say – and I might have even said this myself at times – “Oh yeah, great story. The first thing she does when she gets healed is go right back to the

¹ Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, John 13:1-17

² Mark 1:31

submissive role society demanded of her – serving the men!”

But that’s not really what this passage is saying she did. The Greek word translated “serve” here is a version of the Greek verb “*diakoneó*” – the same word Jesus uses when he says he came “not to be served, but to serve.” It’s the same word for what the angels did for Jesus when they came to serve him while he was being tempted by the devil in the wilderness shortly after his baptism. It’s where we get the root word for the “diaconate,” the order of deacons, the clergy whose ministry is particularly focused on service. It is a sacred and holy service, not demeaning menial labor.

The King James Version actually gets the sense most accurately: it says, “Immediately the fever left her, and she *ministered unto them*.” She ministered unto them, just as the angels ministered unto Jesus in the wilderness. She served them, just as Jesus came not to be served, but to serve.

In other words, she got it. After experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ, she immediately began to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving her neighbor as herself.” Contrast this behavior with that of her son Peter and the other disciples, who throughout their time with Jesus did NOT get it, arguing over things like which one of them will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Most of us are more like Peter than his mother-in-law, though, aren't we? Very few of us get the message instantly the moment we encounter it and begin to live it out. We learn that we are called "not to be served, but to serve," to "love our neighbor as ourselves," and we hear these messages over and over in church, but our behavior doesn't actually change much. We continue to be concerned with power and status, with who is the greatest, wanted to be served instead of to serve, wanting to be loved instead of to love.

I don't know about you, but I've always found it frustrating that Jesus's teachings as recorded in the scriptures don't give us many specifics about *how* to do these lofty, spiritually mature things he calls us to do. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love your enemies." "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Um, yeah, right. Thanks a lot, Jesus, for setting your standards so impossibly high that we could never reach them.

Just hearing these teachings without any practical instructions as to how to live them out, especially since doing these things is so contrary to the instincts of human nature, doesn't really get us anywhere. It might lead us to acknowledge our failings and our need for God's mercy, but it doesn't actually help us change our behavior. And changing our behavior is crucial to being able to experience the full freedom that life in Christ offers us. That's why church leaders Pete and Geri Scazzero

developed the Emotionally Healthy Spirituality program that we're going to be using for our Lenten series this year.

After leading a large multiracial, non-denominational church for over twenty years, they realized that although people in their congregation seemed to be growing in love for God, they weren't growing in their love for others. They would speak with great passion about how following Christ had changed their lives, but in their interactions with other people in the church, they could be defensive, judgmental, critical, unapproachable, and even unsafe to be around. Since scripture teaches that it is impossible to truly love God without loving others,³ Pete and Geri realized that something was wrong – in their own spiritual lives, and in the spiritual lives of their parishioners. In studying to get to the root of this problem, Pete had what he calls his “second conversion experience,” in which he realized that true spiritual growth cannot happen without emotional growth, that it is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

That emotional maturity piece, they discovered, was also missing from many other churches across the country. So they developed the Emotionally Healthy Spirituality

³ 1 John 4:20-21: “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

programs to help other churches walk the same path. The program we'll be doing this Lent is called "Emotionally Healthy Relationships," and it's designed specifically to help us "to love our neighbors as ourselves," to help us get better at keeping this vow of our baptismal covenant. There are a series of videos and small group discussions over eight sessions that teach eight practical skills for learning to love in the way Jesus taught us to love.

In the opening session, which you'll hear two weeks from today when we start the series after church on Feb. 18, Geri talks about how as a culture, we spent lots of time, energy, and money to learn skills specific to our trades and careers, but very few of us give equal attention to learning the skills we need to love others well, skills in how to deal with our emotions and how to relate to others. She points out that it is quite easy to grow into a chronological adult – physical aging is a biological fact; it happens to us regardless of what we do. But to grow into an emotional adult takes intentional effort. Without that effort, it is quite possible for someone to be chronologically 20, 35, 55, or 75 years old but remain an emotional infant or child in their relationships.

Our culture values knowledge and technical skill over emotional skills, but Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us that even if we have all the knowledge and skill in the world, "if we do not love, we are nothing." And we can't love well without practical skills to help us do that.

So please participate in the Lent series this year, and explore how emotional maturity and spiritual maturity are linked. The skills you learn in this course will be applicable to your relationships with your spouse or partner, your children, your work relationships, and your friends, and they will help us grow emotionally as a church community as well. Some of you may be familiar with some of these tools from previous emotional health work you've done, through therapy or other means. But this program connects these skills to our growth as Christians in a way that I think you will find very powerful. So whether this is your first time exploring emotional growth or your hundredth time, join me this Lent to do some intentional work on how we might "love our neighbors as ourselves" with more authenticity and integrity.

Through the intentional application of these skills, I pray that we will become a church where no one could ever say of us that we love God but treat each other poorly. Because as the first letter of John reminds us, "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [Christ] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."