

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
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The Reverend Rick Veit

Does anyone remember the two words that I have been teaching ad nauseum these past few weeks? Is anyone getting sick of them or sick of me mentioning them? Hint: They are on the cards: You Matter. Never get sick of them, please. There are more cards on the announcement tables.

Jesus has begun to teach people the basics of what he is all about: Loving everyone, particularly those in great need or who are poor, the outcast, the sick, orphans, people who are rejected. We are to love people who are different than us: Muslims, Jews, people of no or little faith. Love everybody. You Matter.

Jesus is continuing what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. He is on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel instructing his disciples on how to live a Christ-like life. The first part of his sermon dealt with the assurance of God's blessing on the poor, with whom the Christian community is closely identified, and conversely, God's judgement on the rich who persecute the community.

Bernice King, youngest daughter of Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King, said, "Jesus didn't call it 'social justice'. He simply called it love. If we would only love our neighbors beyond comfort, borders, race, religion, and other differences that we've allowed to be barriers, 'social justice' would be a given. Love makes justice happen." Philosopher and author Cornel West said, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." Love those in great need. You Matter.

Today, Jesus takes his teaching a step deeper, making it even more controversial. We are not only to love each other and love those in great need, but we are also to love...those we cannot stand: our enemies. We are to love those annoying people, those people who have hurt us, treated us poorly. Don't get me wrong. I do not mean that we have to let people continue hurting us. Nor do I mean that there are not consequences for people's actions. But, as Christians, as human beings, we are called to still love them. There is no place in the Christian ethic for vengeance or retaliation.

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen..." Actually, let me stop there. Allow me to back up. Jesus' teaching begins with that phrase. And there are two parts to it: First, Jesus speaks. Jesus is delivering God's wisdom to us. The second is that we must listen in order to receive the benefits. We will not receive the benefits of a Christian life if we do not listen to and know intimately Jesus' words.

How do we listen? We worship. We pray. We study the Bible, God's Word. We, perhaps, listen in silence. We listen through music. We listen with our heart, our conscience. We hear God through the Eucharist, through holy conversations with people or any conversation, through yoga and deep breathing, through exercise. We are to intentionally listen to Jesus. Otherwise, we will not know God's Word through Jesus.

How do you listen to Jesus each day? Believe it or not, I now listen through my eating. Yes, eating. It is true. Daily eating should be a holy act. We should be grateful for every bite, grateful for those who prepared the meal, grateful for our bodies that will receive the food. What am I putting into my body, God's holy vessel? I listen to God through my exercise, through church, through daily prayer, particularly before bed with the kiddos. I listen to God who speaks through my therapist, through my priest that I confess too monthly or bi-monthly. I listen to God through my bishop, through my friends. And, I listen to God through my enemies even, which leads to the other part of Jesus' teaching today. We listen to Jesus, and we are to love our enemies.

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you (Everyone, not just some!); and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

*This* is the hard stuff. Ponder for a moment people you cannot stand, people from your past or present. Dig down. Go to those dark moments in your life. What does it mean to love...even them: the bully, the person who is mean, the person who is a snake? What does it mean to love Kim Jong Un, Vladimir Putin. I know some of you can't stand Donald Trump. What does it mean to love our president? I don't mean love every policy or behavior, but love the person who God has created, warts and all.

Jesus goes on. The other stuff?...loving those who love you, what credit is that to you? That is relatively easy. You really learn what love means when it becomes difficult to love, when everything seems to be falling apart in the relationship.

I also remind couples who are getting married that there are three vows, three promises that will occur within the ceremony. The first vow the couple makes to each other, the vow of love and support. The second vow is from the community who agrees to support and love the couple. Both of those vows will work sometimes and, at other times, fail miserably...which leads to the third vow. It is the most important. It is a vow to God and God's vow to the couple. God will never leave them abandoned. God's vow is perfect and will always be the glue that can hold them together through the easy times and through the difficult ones. God will never abandon them. They are marked as Christ's own forever. But I digress.

Jesus continues: We love with no expectation of return. If we give and love expecting a return on our investment, that is not really giving or loving.

I read in the newspaper this past week that giving to charitable organizations is actually up or at least steady, despite the doubling of the standard tax deductions. So far, people are still committed to serving those in need, regardless of whether it benefits them or not. We will see if their faithfulness continues. With God's help, anything is possible.

When we love our enemies, when we give when it is really difficult to give, Jesus tells his disciples that "...you will be children of the Most High (Your reward will be great.). In another Gospel reading, Matthew writes, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." One commentator said, "The disciples' relationship to God is based on the axiom that the child is like the parent, so the character of God dictates that we practice a love that is not limited by other's responses to us, for God "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked (v. 35)."

The commentator goes on to say, "The imperative to love one's enemies can have a range of meanings, depending on its context: Win over your opponent by kindness; take the moral high road; shame your enemy by your superior goodness; deflect hostility or prevent further abuse by offering no resistance; rise above pettiness; or demonstrate a Christ-like character as a Christian witness." I know when St. Mark's went through a major split a number of years ago based upon how we are to treat people, particularly those who are gay or lesbian. We took the high road, continuing to love those who left who disagreed, but also, and especially we chose not to discriminate based upon sexual identity anymore. And now it is in our Canons as well that people of all ages, all races, all genders, and all sexual identities have full rights in the church. We must pray for our Methodist brothers and sisters who are currently struggling to remain together as a church as they wrestle with these same issues, even this week at their Convention. We are together with them in Christ and must continue to pray for them and support them as they go through this, what I believe, Christ-centered upheaval, all in the name of love. But...I digress again.

Conventional wisdom dictated that one should do harm to one's enemies and good to one's friends. The Essenes at Qumran instructed their adherents to love or hate each person according to his or her share in the Council of God or the Vengeance of God. Jesus instructs differently.

Jesus instructs his disciples with two prohibitions and two positive comments, "Do not judge...do not condemn," and "Forgive..(and) give.." Or, put another way, You matter.

We listen. We love those that believe different from us. We love those who are poor, sick, outcast and rejected. And we love our enemies.

What specific and measurable steps of love will you take now as you leave this house of worship today and continue your walk with Christ?