

Glen Ridge Congregational Church,  
 April 5, 2009  
 Mark 11:1-11; 1 Corinthians 13  
 "The Bottom Line"  
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We have come almost to the end of our journey through Lent this day – Palm Sunday – we’ve been challenged and enriched by our reading of “The Relationship Principles of Jesus”, by our participation in the small groups each week, by listening to and trying to put into practice the lessons of our sermon series on Love, but the hardest part is yet to come as we now begin that journey through Holy Week. We know that our worship next week will be triumphant and joyous but for today, as we look ahead, we know what’s coming. Deep and profound sadness comes as we walk with Jesus through the events of Holy Week – and I believe we’re called to sit with that for a while – before we can celebrate and really appreciate Easter, we have to go through the pain of Good Friday.

The only good news here, I think, is that we don’t go through that pain alone – and if that’s the only lesson we take from this journey that’s a good one – we don’t walk it alone – we have each other, but most of all, we have Jesus walking ahead of us, full of promise, full of a love that we can only imagine. But full of a love that we’re called to emulate in our relationships – and that brings us to the bottom line “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

None of us are meant to live our lives in a vacuum – and in fact, like it or not, we don’t. None of us can fulfill our life’s purpose by ourselves – we need other peoples’ help and they need ours. We are connected one to another, each of us are connected to God – so how do we live that out?

Our text this Lent has been 1 Corinthians 13 – that wonderful passage that can teach us all we need to know about relationships. It sounds so simple, doesn’t it – we talked about that in our small group – this is the most widely read passage at wedding ceremonies – that time of joy and promise for couples - but the teachings are anything but simple – what’s been the hardest relationship principle for you as we’ve walked together this Lenten season?

Maybe it’s judgment: how do we offer love and acceptance and truth without being judgmental? It’s not so hard when we’re in agreement, on the same page with another person, but when we disagree, when we really don’t like what we’re hearing – there’s the challenge. It’s hard to love and accept in that situation, isn’t it. And I know we’ve all been there - our words and actions can be terribly hurtful. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Maybe it’s forgiveness.

From the daily United Church of Christ Lenten devotional: A father was in prison, unable to express sorrow for crime that had infuriated his daughter. Neither had been in touch for years. One day—in times before security was tightened—the father was called into the visiting area. His daughter was there. She ran across the room, threw her

arms around her father, and said, "Dad, I love you. I love you." Her father broke down in tears, embraced his daughter, and said, "I am so sorry. I am so sorry. I love you so much."

Feeling loved and loving. Forgiven—like the Prodigal Son. Freed from the punishment we bring on and deal out. When that happens, it's as though a dam breaks and out comes the real thing. Perhaps we should ask our church to put the Assurance of Pardon before the Prayer of Confession. Given love and forgiveness we can more freely love, and more honestly confess ways we have lived untrue to that love.

Jeremiah prophesied to people whose self-centeredness was devastating. He spoke of God's all-powerful mercy which meant the people could still repent of their ways, having received again God's promise of new life. Lent calls us to look more closely at ways we punish ourselves and one another, inspired by the new life awaiting us through the risen Christ.

Maybe it's mercy:

Again from the UCC devotional: Mercy means more kindness than justice requires. Mercy is kindness that is beyond what is merited or expected. Mercy is deserving retribution, but receiving kindness. Here's judgment again: often in life, we expect people to "measure up" or to prove that they are worthy of our good favor and kind acts. The whole world seems to operate on a "merit system," where personal responsibility and individual accountability are the main criteria for receiving favor. We often feel justifiably angry, indifferent and estranged from people in our lives who have seriously let us down; people who have betrayed our trust; people who have wasted our good will.

And just when we've resolved to never have our kindness exploited again by undeserving individuals, we find ourselves in the season of Lent, where we are confronted again with the undeserved favor and reckless kindness God has extended to each of us through the sacrifice and suffering of Jesus. Now the question is: can those of us who have received great mercy extend great mercy to those who have hurt us?

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The first and greatest commandment is to love God. The second is to love your neighbor. And the golden rule that we memorized as children – do unto others - means you love not only God, neighbor, one another but also even your enemies - this covers everyone! In the best of times in our relationships and in the worst of times in our relationships we are told to love, to treat everyone as we would want to be treated.

Doesn't this call us out of ourselves! Doesn't this challenge the way we live in the world! And the reality is, we all do live in the world – and that's hard. It's not so difficult, I think, to hear these words in this place on Sunday mornings – in the context of worship – we are so very good at compartmentalizing our lives. What is obvious as we sit here in the pews is not so obvious “out there” in the real world. But that's where Jesus calls us, isn't it – into a world of fear, of anxiety, of a culture of “me first”, of revenge, of scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, into an attitude of I'll do for you so you'll do for me.

Holladay says in his book, “The Golden Rule is a picture of the true nature of love. Love is not reciprocal. Love is sacrificial. Love gives itself without waiting for others to give.”

Like a parent who will do anything, absolutely anything, for her child. Many years ago I had a group of high school students on retreat and we were talking about this

kind of love – we talked about their parents who would do anything for them – even with the normal teenage rebellion and resistance to parents these young people knew that their parents cared deeply for them, only wanted the best for them, and even when they were behaving their worst, that love didn't go away. As they shared example after example in their own lives, I asked them, who does that remind you of? It was quiet for a minute until one of them said, "God. God loves us no matter what."

And isn't that the lesson for us – that's the example we have in front of us, the challenge that's always there, and from that comes the hope, the strength, to love as Jesus loved.

And just as our parents love us 24/7 no matter what, so goes God. And if we are loved and cherished by God, how can we not pass that on – not just here in this place – though there's always room for improvement even here – but where we spend our days and nights the rest of the week. Imagine how our relationships with our co-workers, our class mates, our families, those we meet as we go about our daily routines – imagine how fulfilling and wonderful those relationships would be if we practice the golden rule everywhere, all the time.

We have an awesome example in the life and ministry of Jesus: how can we help each other, help ourselves, keep that in the forefront in every single relationship we have! And I submit that we are in relationship of some sort with every single person we meet – just because we're all God's children.

We have to slow down, don't we – we have to think about this before we open our mouths, before we take any action of any kind– we have to look and think beyond ourselves all the time! What would change in our relationships if before we spoke, we thought about how it would feel if someone spoke that way to us? What would change in our relationships if before we took any action, we thought about how we would feel being the recipient of that action? It's hard work – but we do it for a simple reason: because Jesus tells us to. And not only does Jesus tell us to do these things, but Jesus also gives us the example, the strength, the power, to indeed perform!

Imagine how our families, our workplaces, our church, our community, indeed our world would be enriched if we lived by the Golden Rule. Humility. Integrity. Mercy. Sacrifice. Clear communication. How our world would be enriched if we applied these principles every day, every where. For just a moment, as Holladay says, open your mind to faith and dream with me. What would life look like if we all began to live out in all our relationship this kind of love Jesus taught?

It doesn't have to be in big ways either – in fact, I think it's the little things we do and say that mean the most – because those little things are the stuff of real life. It's the words we say in anger or frustration that hurt the worst. It's also the words we say in love that mean the most – I'm thinking of you today. You matter in my life and in the life of this congregation, this workplace, this family. We have to take the time, don't we. And break out of ourselves in a selfless love.

I received an email from a dear friend this week – maybe you have seen it too – it's titled what love means to a 4-8 year old. A group of professionals asked a group of children in this age group what does love mean – here are some of their responses, deeper and broader than anyone could have imagined. Listen to them in the context of our study:

From a 6 year old: Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French Fries without making them give you any of theirs.

From another 6 year old: If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend you hate.

From an 8 year old: you really shouldn't say "I love you" unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.

A 4 year old: when someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth. Think about that for a while.

And the final one, deemed a real winner by the professionals: a four year old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into his yard, climbed up onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing. I just helped him cry."

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Children know how to love, don't they. With an honesty that's refreshing. And they know how to love with their whole selves. Let us become as children as we follow Jesus through Holy Week and all the days of our lives. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's the bottom line.

Let us pray, using the words of Tom Holladay as we end this journey or even as we continue this journey:

Jesus, in my own power I can't love this way. Show me how – and then give me the strength. I need more than your example: I need your power. I humbly ask for your power. Lord, I want to love the way you loved. As crazy a dream as that is, as high a goal as that sets, I commit myself to spend the rest of my life pursuing it. I want to be like you, Jesus. I want to love like you, Jesus. Thank you from the depths of my soul for loving me. In your name, Amen.