

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Our passage this morning tells us of one of the first public acts of Jesus' ministry, in the Gospel of Mark. This scene in the synagogue may be the first time many people were hearing his teachings about love and were wondering: can this guy be trusted? Will he practice what he preaches?

Something important to understand about this whole scene, is that its happening on the Sabbath. You may recall that in Exodus, as part of the Hebrew Scriptures, God had commanded the Israelites to keep the 7th day of the week holy, to not labor on the Sabbath, as a way to restore balance to all creation.

So, if in THIS story, Jesus wanted to stay in line with the letter of the law- exactly what was written - he'd have to ignore the man with the unclean spirit, tell him to come back another day. It's in this moment, that the crowd is watching and waiting to see how this new teacher will practice the Sabbath in light of the man in front of him: clearly in need, possessed and crying out, demanding action .

Just as Jesus is faced with how to uphold the law of his faith in light of the love he teaches, decades later, we find a group of people in the city of Corinth struggling to put **their** faith into practice and still be promoters of love.

You see there in Corinth, there were different ideas about what to do about meat sold in the markets that were dedicated to other gods. The older Christians that Paul is writing to are wanting to eat the meat because they KNOW there are no

other gods. But Paul reminds them that if they do that, they could damage their relationship with the newer Christians who weren't eating that meat. They are struggling with what to do when doing what they *thought* was right, is actually damaging their relationships.

Community certainly can be messy. Today, the day of this congregation's annual meeting...I'm especially reminded of how as a church body, we all have unique experiences and knowledge sets that we bring to the church. This makes a church wonderful, but also brings its challenges- with so many different experiences and opinions in one community.

I know that when I've had experiences that other people haven't had or if I think I know something that others don't, I'm not proud to admit that what happens with me is that I can start labeling people I disagree with and rushing to quick judgments. For example, When someone is late to a meeting, I sometimes think "oh that person is disorganized or hard to work with." Instead of wondering what larger issue was at work in their lives or in our relationship. And If someone disagrees with me, I might say, "oh that person is uninformed."

If you are like me, in split seconds we can place labels on one another, we make judgments instead of observations, become defensive instead of curious, we assign blame and lose sight of what we have in common. We risk ignoring our own humanity and the humanity of people we are in relationship with.

Our texts today remind us that people haven't changed too much over the course of 2000 years. But they also give us a way forward. You see, when Jesus healed the man with the unclean spirit, He may not have been following the Sabbath according to other religious teachers at the time, but he was in line with the original intent of

the Sabbath (the “spirit of the law” if you will)- restoring the balance of creation, restoring relationship. He saw the humanity of the anguished and suffering man before him even in the midst of conflict and confrontation. He restored the man to himself, and restored the relationships between the man and his family and community. Jesus let **love** drive him to put *relationship in front of dogma*. And when his act of love matched his teaching on love, the people saw his authority.

Again, decades later, Paul points to the **centrality of love** when he writes to the Corinthians wondering if they should practice what their knowledge tells them. Paul says: “we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Basically: We all know things! And while that can make you FEEL good, it can sometimes make you look down on others as well.

We are reconciled to God not through specific beliefs and practices, but through love. Yes, the beliefs and practices are important, but God reconciles us to God through love. And God reconciles us to **one another** through the love of Christ. Paul says, ⁸“**Food will not bring us close to God.**” **We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.**” And he essentially says, if you think otherwise, you risk placing a stumbling block in your relationship.

Paul urges this community: Let LOVE guide you, let LOVE build you and the community up.

And so, dear friends, I believe that these texts, today, are calling *us* to see each other through Christ’s love and through Christ’s eyes. To put love first. To put relationship before pride or snap judgments. To be reconciled to one another through the love that Christ has freely given us.

This past week I was at a workshop sponsored by the Center for Nonviolent Communication and we did an exercise that made me realize how hard it is to do something at the root of what it means to see each other with Christ's eyes. To listen- to REALLY listen! We did an exercise where we had to listen and empathize with someone's situation, feelings and needs for 12 WHOLE minutes. I thought I was good at empathizing, but those 12 minutes felt like an eternity.

Tools like active listening, deep empathy, and recognizing common human needs that we share- are all ways we can see each other with Christ's eyes.

So today, thinking about these texts, our annual meeting, and our coming year of ministry together, I hope and pray that this community would continue to grow and build in love. In the midst of all our common projects and goals this year (and years to come), May the love we profess as Christians be evident in our day to day relationships and conversations and may we never stop questioning those things that make us feel puffed up with knowledge rather than committed to a love that builds. AMEN.