

All We Need to Know....

[Text - Matthew 9:9-17]

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In *Matthew* chapter nine, right after Jesus calls Matthew the tax-collector to follow him, Jesus joins with him and some of his friends for dinner. When the religious authorities who are scrutinizing Jesus' behavior see this, they immediately criticize what he's doing. They ask his *disciples*, "Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and other known "sinners?" [Apparently, these big bad enforcers of religious behavior are too *chicken* to ask Jesus directly!] Nevertheless, Jesus hears their complaint, and responds to them directly: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice' - for I did not come to call the righteous, but to welcome sinners!"

"Go and learn what this means...." What this *means*, is that neither Jesus, nor God, are impressed with people who perform sanctimonious rituals, yet do not practice steadfast love. Citing the prophet Hosea, Jesus reiterates the essential teaching of all the Old Testament prophets: That the Holy One's primary desire is for people to treat one another with fairness and compassion, kindness and love.

In First Century Israel, many people felt overwhelmed and oppressed by a heavy-handed, institutionalized religion that kept them down, and kept God "way up there" as a distant and dreadful judge - just waiting for them to make a mistake. And as most of us know, it's extremely difficult to live freely or fully [and to not screw things up] if we're preoccupied with the fear of doing something wrong. So Jesus encourages us all to see and experience the Holy One in a wholly different way - as One who gives us this marvelous gift of Life, and asks that we share it with one another - freely, fully, and fairly. In other words, that we learn to live together as compassionate children of our One Heavenly Parent.

As Robert Fulghum reminds us in our Continuing Testament, most people learn very early in Life the basic ABC's of decent behavior.

“Share everything, Play Fair, Don’t Hit People, Don’t Take Things That Aren’t Yours, Say You’re Sorry When You Hurt Somebody.” It doesn’t take a genius to figure-out these things. *Carrying-out* these things, however, does take a genuine commitment to Holy Way of living. As an authentic Child of the Holy One, Jesus approaches Life with a holiness and a wholeness that is truly remarkable. As a self-aware individual - completely secure in his relationship with his Divine Source - Jesus can connect with others right where he finds them; relating to them with an open mind and a compassionate heart. By doing so, he helps people open-up and embrace that same Spirit of compassion and forgiveness, wholeness and joy. Thereby, Jesus shows us all how to relate to God and to one another in ways that enhance both *our* lives *and* the lives of those around us.

When you and I actually see other people as precious children of our One Divine Source, and we freely share with them the Divine blessings that we ourselves have experienced, we make a tremendously positive difference in this world. Our calling as the Church - as the living, loving Body of Christ - is to help transform people’s lives for the better. And this *critical* work isn’t accomplished by *critically* picking-at people; but by compassionately picking-up people, lifting their spirits, and raising their quality of life. When we look at Jesus, we see him doing just that. He helps people move from oppression to freedom, from despair to hope, from fearfully trembling before God to faithfully serving God - by freely serving one another. By showing people unconditional Divine love and grace, Jesus transforms a group of ordinary individuals, into an extraordinary community of compassion, welcome, and affirmation. And by seeing social outcasts in a completely different light, Jesus helps them see themselves in that same light - as loved and valued members of God’s One Inclusive Family.

One of the great things about *this* Church Family, is that this is a community of faith where people's differences aren't disparaged, but are welcomed and encouraged, affirmed and celebrated. This is a place where we can all learn about and experience the *Good News* of Divine love and grace, embodied in genuine, down-to-earth people. People who know how to have a good time, as well as how to be there for one another in Life's most difficult and painful times. A continuum of faithful people who - for 200 years - have rallied together to be a beacon of welcome and hope, compassion and grace.

So today, as we kick-off another season of learning and growth, music and worship, our minds and our hearts remain centered on that profoundly simple lesson that Jesus teaches us: to do unto others as we would have others do unto us. When you and I get that one "golden rule" right, everything else is mere child's play!