

“WWJD?”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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5th Sun./Epiphany

Isaiah 58:1-9

Matthew 5:13-20

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:20

Let us pray... O God,

“What would Jesus do?”

Inspire us for how answering that question can help each of us in our lives.

Certainly we need help when problems arise,

but also to receive the opportunities you give us each day with joy.

Amen

Once upon a time, I told the stories of Mary Magdalene at my home church
of Plainfield Congregational UCC, which I did as part of a special service
that included Holy Communion.

That was especially meaningful for me because I was given the opportunity to
offer communion to the former minister of our church, Willard Bickett,
who was my pastor when I was growing up.

In my recitation of John 20 using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible,
Mary Magdalene is surprised to find Jesus standing outside of the tomb.

She goes to hug him, but he prevents her, saying.

“Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...” [John 20:17]

The way I told it, I used arm gestures as if to say he
he didn't allow her to touch him.

Afterwards, my mother – who had been watching from the choir balcony,
spoke to me and said,

“Jesus would never refuse to hug someone.”

I am not sure where that is written in the Bible,

but I began to look at this text in a new way.

At that time, I was working at Greystone Park State Psychiatric Hospital
where I was the recreation person assigned to 50 Ellis –
a housing facility for relatively higher functioning patients.

There were three locked wards with men on the 3rd floor,
co-ed and deaf patients on the 2nd, and women on the 1st.

I did various programs including a drawing class, board games,
and leisure walks around the grounds.

There were also special events like our weekly Bingo game
where those who were interested to play came to the 2nd Floor
from the other wards.

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Generally for each of the wards, I would call out if anyone wanted to participate in whatever the activity was for that day.

There was this one woman – I think her name was Linda, who was in her late 20s, a small, slight person, with short dark hair, always a little unkempt and bedraggled, with a vaguely wild look to her. She would pace around the Women’s Ward, seemingly lost in her own world, rarely taking notice of me – almost never participating in my activities. When she did, she would come up to me with arms open – as if for a hug. Now, I was pretty careful to maintain my boundary with the people there, so I’d wave her off.

Then she would raise both her eyebrows and – in a voice just above a whisper, she would say, “[Expletive deleted]!” You can fill in the blank!

Well after my mother’s admonition about what Jesus would do in not refusing to hug somebody, the occasion came when Linda showed up for a program and afterwards came up to me for a hug. This time, I gave her a hug with just my arms around her. Then she stepped back and in a voice just above a whisper, she said, “[Expletive deleted]!”
What are you going to do?

‘What would Jesus do?’

That was a popular catchphrase among church youth groups in the 1990s with many young people wearing ‘WWJD?’ bracelets. It is a question we are still asking and the answer is woven into our scripture readings today,

The Isaiah passage is an expansion of the Micah verse from last week:
...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8[RSV]

In the Isaiah passage, we are told that it is not especially important to God for people to fast – which could jeopardize their health, or for people to humiliate themselves in some act of deprivation; nor does God particularly want people to praying to win God’s favor.

However, what God would really like is devotion like this:

Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly.

Free those who are abused!

Share your food with everyone who is hungry;

share your home with the poor and homeless.

Give clothes to those in need; don’t turn away your relatives.

Isaiah 58:6-7

Willard, p.3

That part about ‘*don’t turn away your relatives*’ might also apply to unfriending them on Facebook these days!

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus says:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:20

So it would seem that Jesus is demanding *even greater* attention to detail, such that even Heaven and Earth would pass away before a single letter of the Bible would be taken out.

Yet it is precisely following the “letter of the law” that doesn’t satisfy what Jesus requires either – he wants more than that...

Love is the answer – the law of love, the law of rational loving-kindness is what we should endeavor to follow in our lives.

That is the discipline to which we should constantly seek to perfect ourselves and put into practice.

Then we can go around – like Jesus, *breaking* laws, or as Luther said, “Sin boldly”, because when we do so, like Jesus did, it would be for the sake of the common good.

Jesus forgave people –

something only priests were empowered to do on God’s behalf; and Jesus healed people on the Sabbath – which was considered a form of work and all work was prohibited on the Sabbath.

Yet the law of rational loving-kindness:

to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, essentially means that it makes sense to be kind, and you count, too, in this equation.

So, with this higher law having jurisdiction in all situations of life, it is important for people to forgive each other without needing authorization, and to heal someone and relieve their distress whenever that is needed – just you hope others would do for you...

The letter of the law serves as an organizing principle for appropriate conduct, but *the spirit of the law* guides us to the practical relief of suffering through compassion.

Love – as in rational-lovingkindness, demands equals;

It requires mutuality, respect, and choice;

There can be no love without choice – for when “love” is compelled, it ceases to be love.

Where love is the central dynamic of healthy religions, compulsion – like addiction, or coercion – like abusive behavior, are the defining mechanisms of cults that can take the form of unhealthy religions or other social organizations.

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*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:20*

Sounds like an impossible task to live up to,
but think of it in terms of the Ten Commandments as 10 Don'ts
that can correspond to 2 Do's. Which is easier, then, to put into practice?

This is the lead-in to the Sermon on The Mount where Jesus gives a fresh
perspective on various commandments.

Jesus is telling us we need to do better;

We need to do better than lip service to rules that give us an unfair advantage,
or excuse bad behavior because of a literal reading of the rules –
like the justification in American history for slavery
because it is in the Bible.

The way I see this text, is that Jesus telling us: love is the core message of the Bible
and the way we should make our choices for how we live our lives,
is to do the most loving thing.

I have paraphrased the text of Jesus' admonition to do what is loving,
interpreting his words in this way:

**DO NOT ASSUME THAT I CAME TO UNDERMINE
THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS.
I DID NOT COME TO UNDERMINE THEM,
BUT TO AFFIRM THEM.
I AM TELLING YOU THE TRUTH,
NEITHER HEAVEN & EARTH
NOR THE LEAST STROKE OF ANY LETTER OF THE LAW
WILL PASS AWAY BEFORE EVERYTHING THAT IS
SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN, DOES.
THEREFORE,
WHOEVER MAKES A HABIT OF BREAKING THE LAW OF LOVE –
THE LAW OF LOVING-KINDNESS
AND CONVINCES OTHERS TO DO THE SAME,
WILL HAVE LITTLE TO DO WITH
THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.
BUT WHOEVER PRACTICES AS WELL AS PREACHES
THE LAW OF LOVING-KINDNESS WILL BE CONSIDERED
A GIANT IN THAT BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.
FOR I TELL YOU THAT UNLESS YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS
EXCEEDS THE LITERAL INTERPRETATIONS OF
THE PHARISEES AND OTHER RELIGIOUS EXPERTS,
YOU WILL NOT EVEN ENTER
THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.**

By seeking to do what is most loving, we go beyond the 'letter of the law' to
have limitless options for fulfilling the law.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Isaiah 58:1-9 is comparable with Micah 6:6-8.
our lesson from last week, emphasizing actions of justice
that build community relationships...*

Shout the message! Don't hold back. Say to my people Israel:

You've sinned! You've turned against the LORD.

² Day after day, you worship him and seem eager to learn his teachings.

You act like a nation that wants to do right by obeying his laws.

You ask him about justice, and say you enjoy worshiping the LORD.

³ You wonder why the LORD pays no attention

when you go without eating and act humble.

But on those same days that you give up eating,

you think only of yourselves and abuse your workers.

⁴ You even get angry and ready to fight.

No wonder God won't listen to your prayers!

⁵ Do you think the LORD wants you to give up eating

and to act as humble as a bent-over bush?

Or to dress in sackcloth and sit in ashes?

Is this really what he wants on a day of worship?

⁶ I'll tell you what it really means to worship the LORD.

Remove the chains of prisoners who are chained unjustly.

Free those who are abused!

⁷ Share your food with everyone who is hungry;

share your home with the poor and homeless.

Give clothes to those in need; don't turn away your relatives.

⁸ Then your light will shine like the dawning sun,

and you will quickly be healed.

Your honesty will protect you as you advance,

and the glory of the LORD will defend you from behind.

⁹ When you beg the LORD for help, he will answer, "Here I am!"

Don't mistreat others or falsely accuse them or say something cruel.

Let us be challenged & guided by these words...

Matthew 5:13-20

[Jesus said,]

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste,
how shall its saltiness be restored?

It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out
and trodden under foot [...]

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.

¹⁵ Nor do [people] light a lamp and put it under a bushel,
but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

¹⁶ Let your light so shine before [others],
that they may see your good works and
give glory to your [Abba] Father who is in heaven.

¹⁷ “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets;
I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.

¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away,
not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹ Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments
and teaches [people] so,
shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven;
but [the one] who does them and teaches them
shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.