

Epler's Church UCC, Leesport, PA. August 4, 2019.

Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 19:13-15

“Don't Forget...To Love Each Other.”

The final sermon in the series is a simple topic and yet one that needs to answer a number of questions. Don't forget...to love each other. A simple statement. One that gives us direct advice to love each other. So simple, that a child can do it and you can to.

Let us begin by looking at the Mark text for this morning because it gives us our first question. Why was Jesus preaching at the lakeside and not in the synagogue? The answer is simple. The authorities didn't want him to.

The synagogue door was beginning to get shut to Jesus. Now he was teaching, not in the synagogue, but by the lakeside (and as we read later, everywhere and anywhere). The open air was to be his church, the blue sky his canopy, and a hillside or a fishing boat, his pulpit.

There is an expression that when God closes a door, he opens a window. This means that whenever one opportunity becomes unavailable that something else, and possibly something better, will come along. When the door closed on Jesus to share his message of love to the people, he opened the window, climbed out of it, and stood on the third floor roof, if

that is what it would have taken for him to get his message across.

Another question that we find when looking at this Mark text is: Who was Jesus spending time with? We have heard it said, many times, that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, but do we really understand how much tax collectors were really hated individuals.

Matthew was plain and simply, a hated man. Tax-gatherers were hated in the ancient world. We may not like paying taxes today and some may outright hate it, but I don't know that the

people that collect our taxes are “hated” individuals, not like they were in the ancient world.

Now, one reason for disliking the tax collectors so much was that they were misleading, criminals, for lack of a better word, and would collect as much as they could get and line their own pockets with the extra. A sinful, deceitful thing to do...and yet...Jesus took him as one of his closest companions and disciples. Although a sinner, Jesus welcomed Matthew into his family and journeyed with him on the road.

This story tells us something about Jesus. It was as he walked along the lakeside that he called Matthew to follow him

on this journey. Jesus was never “off duty.” He kept walking. Jesus kept looking. Jesus kept loving...and loving the unlovable at that.

This brings us to another question: who are the unlovable? The short answer is no one is unlovable. But society breaks us up into categories, for which there are people who have not had the same treatment, care, and love that others have had.

This is why the church is called not only to love the sinner, but to love the ones that are usually called sinners (and worse) by the norms of society. This passage from Mark allows us to

hear Jesus' response to the "experts of the law" when Jesus gives us an analogy about a doctor.

"A doctor," he said, "goes where he is needed. People in good health do not need him; sick people do; I am doing just the same; I am going to those who are sick in soul and who need me most." This is our call to help the less fortunate. This is our call to go to the people who are sick, not necessarily in soul as Jesus puts it, but by seeking out the people who might just need to know that they are loved and that God loves them.

It would be easy for me to begin naming groups of people that don't feel loved by the church or by society. It would also

be easy for me to miss a group of people. So, I want you to take a moment and think about those in your life that you may know that don't feel loved. Is there someone that you have had conversations with about the church or maybe even invited them to church, only to find out that they have been hurt by the church and that they don't feel welcome here. Or they don't feel loved here.

Maybe all of their life they have been told that they are not a good person, or someone who would be welcomed in a church because of who they are; what they look like; where they came from; or who they love.

It feels like there is so much hatred that is showing up more and more. Sometimes, I think as a church we need to throw out all of our doctrine and specific beliefs and do one simple thing...love more. That is what Jesus wants us to do. Eat with the sinners. Sit down with tax collectors, or just “hated” people. Love each other no matter who they are...or where they are on life’s journey...they should be loved.

There is an innocence to this idea of love that as I began my sermon comes from the passage from Matthew. It is strange that the passage from Mark was talking about Matthew. Here

we then have Matthew telling his version of what happened and an experience that he had once he was following Jesus.

Such a short and simple passage in Matthew when Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me.” Let the ones who understand life so much more simply to come to me. To receive the blessing that all people are entitled to. To show the love to them as they understand it so simply. Jesus loves them. Let them come.

This short passage doesn't come without its problems and questions. Why did the disciples want to keep the people and

the kids away? I know that there are people who are just not “kid people.” Some folks are just not comfortable around kids.

The disciples saw that Jesus was tired. We can envision that life was just draining out of Jesus as he healed and helped those in need. But that didn't matter. Jesus had love to give. The children needed that love and that blessing. Nothing was going to stop Jesus was offering that care to those children.

I think as adults, we can get inside of our own heads. We think about things so deeply and theologically and intellectually that we don't take the time to just simply be. Be present. Be creative. Be loving. Don't think...Just be.

Both of these passages from Mark and Matthew give us examples of who to eat with or who to let into our space. We are welcomed by these two authors into their stories. We are brought through these short messages with a simple lesson or two.

Mark shows us a Jesus that eats with all people. Shares with all people. Loves all people. No exceptions. Matthew shows us that we can come to Jesus like a little child. Simple, loving, compassionate people on our own journeys through our faith and inviting others to come along for the ride.

The world needs a little bit more love. The church needs a little bit more openness. Let us make sure that we don't forget...to love each other.

Amen.