

May 1, 2016 “Visibility, Tangibility, Practicality” Matthew
5:12-16

Many of you have realized by now that I like to preach in series...picking a Biblical theme and playing it through its twists and turns. Usually I do not interrupt a series. In several cases I have terminated a series thinking I was starting to rattle on or beat a dead horse. Because of the uncertainty of the time during which I was taking radiation therapy, I did not name the series. And it has been interrupted. So forgive me, but I am going to try and summarize where we were, as I attempt to pick up the thread and continue to pursue it.

It started with the word Christian. I trust you were as surprised as I am to learn that that word is not our word. What I mean is, the followers of Jesus did not sit down one day and say, “We ought to have a name. What are we going to call ourselves. Christians? Ok! Didn't happen that way. In the same way you can create new words in our English language...(you are Stirlingites, if for no other reason than you worship in this building in Stirling. I am also a Bellevillian, and I know Trentonians and am related to at least one Bramptonite)...in the same way that you can do that in English, you can do it in Greek. The word Christian was invented in Antioch. In Antioch, they, first called people like us Christians. The word only appears in the Bible 3 times and in each case where it appears it is obvious it was used by people not committed to following Jesus, and they used it to describe people who were. We saw the word Christian could mean many things. It is a slippery term.

We also saw that the early followers of Jesus did have a term that is clearly defined, used many times in the Gospels and the balance of the New Testament documents, used by Jesus Himself, to

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designate his friends and followers....disciples, Jesus disciples. Don't think for a moment we are going to try and throw out the word Christian. But I have to tell you, when I use the word Christian from now on, I am going to mean, a disciple of Jesus. Someone who is committed. A believer.

From that point we journeyed to the Upper Room...Last Supper. Thursday night. Less than 24 hours to the crucifixion of Jesus. Our Lord's last teaching to and with the 12. Remember the words? "A new commandment I give you. Love one another as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are my disciples...that you love one another. (John 13:34-35)

I am a person who enjoys asking questions. It is a means by which I get specific. I ask questions because, if we are talking about loving people I want to find out if there are loopholes. Or as in this case, nailing down the fact that there are no loopholes. Jesus what does it mean...to love one another? Jesus provides an answer that is as specific as it can get. Love one another as I have loved you. To understand what Jesus means when He says something, you have to look at what Jesus does. And the words "love one another as I have loved you," take us straight to Calvary. This is not about just loving those who love us in return. It is definitely a tougher assignment that requires more than a little grit. To love as Jesus loved one has to be willing to suffer for doing so.

The one thing we all understand about the cross is that it involved suffering. So our assignment should we accept it, (and yes this sounds a little like the Mission Impossible disclaimer right before the tape recording vanishes in a puff of smoke) is going to involve some discomfort. What I learned during my 7 weeks of

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radiation therapy was discomfort is a soft word that means pain. It is reasonable to anticipate that if you are going to love people as Jesus loved them...that is the assignment...at some point you are going to sit back and say, Lord, this hurts. And His reply is going to be... "Ya, I know." So do not think you can get away with it always being the best experience in the world.

And Calvary provides a list of examples. Who did Jesus die for? A world full of people who are simply and genuinely without qualification...no loopholes...sinners. I am first and foremost a sinner in need of the salvation of God. So are you. So is everyone else who lives in this community, this province, this nation, and all the other nations of the world. "By grace we are saved through faith in Jesus." One way. So who did Jesus die for? All those pharisees and Saducees, the teachers of the Law, the Scribes who accused Him falsely in order to get Pilate to rule that Jesus should die.

A surprising number of them including the apostle Paul became disciples of Jesus, called Christians by opponents of the faith in Antioch, and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. But never lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of them continued to be opponents of faith in Jesus for the rest of their days. Jesus died for all the Roman soldiers in the world at that time. Including those who stripped Him and whipped Him. Including the one who drove the nails. Including the ones who played at dice for Jeuss' robe as he bled and died. And yes, including that one who said, surely He was the Son of God.

He died to save 2 theives. One made it into paradise. One added to Jesus pain with the words that he said right to the end. Ya...there are times when loving people is going to be painful. That

is a fact. So why did Jesus make this new commandment part of the assignment for His disciples, for Christians? It is not a bad question,

Tucked away in the midst of a lot of teaching belonging to that body of teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount is this little line. “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” It is a hard saying but I have seen it born out in life over and over again. “Seeing, is believing.” We crave visible evidence. Show me the proof cries the skeptic. Prior to the incarnation, when Jesus was born of Mary and the Holy Spirit, the Biblical truism is that no man has seen God at any time.

The fact is, when we love people, as Christ loved, as the Holy Spirit enables us to love in a 5th dimensional manner....and the 5th dimension by the way is eternity...God becomes visible to people. Let your light, what you know about Jesus Christ, shine before men, not that you have mastered religious jargon, but that they may see your good deeds, and find themselves praising your Father, God Himself, who is not visible here, but who is in heaven. Our good deeds, our acts of grace, driven and powered by the Spirit of the Lord sweep questions off the table as they, not we, as they perceive that God is present and in the midst of His people. Acts of sacrificial love make God visible where nothing else will.

Last week we hosted a Memorial Service for Eugene Burrell. A gentle man. A lady approached me downstairs and this is what she said to me. “That was a lovely service. Thank you.” And then she added, “I am attending Al-Anon. I am really trying to discover my Higher Power. God is in this place. And I'm not even supposed to know He exists.” Anyone who knew Eugene knows we

loved him and were loved by him. She saw God present in all of that. Deeds of love, deeds of light make God visible to those who are in great need.

Lois Yellowlees, agreed to attempt a eulogy of Eugene from the family's perspective. I do not have a copy of her address but I was struck by a phrase that was part of her description of this church's involvement in Eugene's last days. She gave us credit for the fact that Eugene had been visited at home, for his eventually being hospitalized and cared for in a medical sense, and she specifically mentioned that a number of us visited him in hospital. My mind made this connection: Jesus said, "When I was sick you visited me....in that you did this to the least of these my bretheren, you did this unto me." A good deed that is loving and Christ like, makes Him tangible to people, in a way words will never do. Visible and tangible. Perceptable by sight. Perceptable by touch. Remember what Thomas said in the upper room? Except I be able to touch the nail prints and the gaping wound in the Lord's side. I will never believe. And Jesus was suddenly among them saying, "Thomas...my hands...my side." And Thomas replied, "My Lord, and my God!" Visible and Tangible.

Deeds of love do one thing more. As little else will do they meet the Practicality test, and they pass it with flying colours. A deed of sacrificial love will always address one thing above all else. Need. Real need. I was never aware until very recently how pain free my 70 years have been. Let me tell you the 71st year has been a doozie. I now have the right to say I know what it is like to lie in bed whimpering from the pain that cannot be eased by earthly means. Barbara is praying I will not go into details. And I won't. Deeds that reflect the love of Jesus are utterly practical. They deal

with real need. And as a result they become part of our testimony of mercy received when all we wanted was relief.

When Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you,” He was directing us to share the ultimate, and I mean ultimate testimony. Something the eyes cannot deny seeing. Something that the sense of touch perceives, something that is utterly practical in an hour or moment of need.” She said, “God is in this place. And I'm not even supposed to know He exists.” That's what she said....

Let us pray;

Lord we rightly perceive there is a danger in loving people. You have been there, you know what I mean. It means involving ourselves in risky business. The older I get the more I become sure that journeying, living by faith is indeed a matter of taking risks. Help us to love others as you love them. Help us to love others, as you have loved us. And use our actions tendered in love to make you visible, tangible, and to meet real people's real needs.

Amen