



Loving Everyone Into Sacred Community
By Bill Lawson

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Jesus began his ministry by loving everyone into sacred community before he ever began the teaching, healing, and other facets of his ministry. This is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year's theme comes from the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God... and your neighbor as yourself..."¹ The challenge for followers of Jesus has always been to reconcile our relationships with God's love. Wherever we fall short in loving as Christ loves, we are invited to acknowledge and revise our behavior. How we relate to each other within and beyond the faith community is a reflection of the progress we are making in our ultimate reconciliation and unity with God, humanity, and all Creation.

We offer everyone an invitation to Christian discipleship.

And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of [people]. (*Mark 1:17 KJV*)

"Come with me. I'll make a new kind of [fisher] out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." (*Mark 1:17 MSG*)

Jesus used the imagery of trawling by fisherfolk as a metaphor for gathering everyone into a sacred community of love. But instead of entrapping prey for *our* benefit, we are invited to gather humankind for *their* advantage. Instead of mending our *nets* to cast them into the water for a draft of fish to pull into a boat and prepare them for the market, we are invited to mend our *interactions* to cast into society for a draft of people to draw into a community and prepare each other for fellowship. Hebrews suggests,

Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.²

We're not just out there on our own, casting nets we know nothing about into unfamiliar waters and drawing people into a bewildering relationship. Jesus' invitation includes the promise of our *becoming* fishers, and that he will personally guide us as we each *grow* into our specific roles -- our callings -- as disciples of Jesus. Jesus will teach us our part. Jesus will guide us. Jesus will share his knowledge and experience with us. Jesus will help us transform into the best versions of ourselves. The invitation of Jesus as he calls us to discipleship is echoed in various ways throughout the New Testament and the history of the Church, as Cecil Frances Alexander reflected in his hymn,

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea;
day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
saying, "Christian, follow me."³

Through our loving relationships, God is transforming the world.

And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.
(*1 Corinthians 7:31 KJV*)

Many of the most significant teachings of all religions are shared throughout and beyond the faith community. People don't have to believe in God to believe in the Golden Rule, for example, which is shared by many different religions in addition to having been one of the central teachings of Jesus. Most Christians can frame much of our own doctrinal philosophies in agreement with the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, two of the most ancient and accepted statements of the Christian faith. Where the trouble begins is when we start unpacking those statements and deciding how to interpret them. Things start getting even more gnarly when our conversations lead to action. We diverge rapidly when we start deciding what we should do and how we should act and treat each other as a result of these beliefs we share. The Sermon on the Mount is controversial in today's society, even among all who believe that everything in it was taught by Jesus. Many are vehemently opposed to allowing anyone to put those teachings into practice. Jesus addressed this issue, saying, "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."⁴ In the Good News Translation, that verse reads, "Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice!"⁵

But just think how the world would be if everyone could give each other just a little more leeway in how we discuss our faith and if everyone could be just a little more willing to put their most Christ-like convictions into practice. The gap between faith and practice would become much more narrow, and with it, the gap between each other. It would be like a whole new world – like the old world is passing away and the new world is taking its place. The new world of love and hospitality is overcoming the old world of fear and hostility.

Trust the Spirit as she guides all people into the truth.

Trust in [God] at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before [God]: God is a refuge for us. (*Psalm 62:8 KJV*)

The psalmist encourages us to trust God all the time, in every circumstance. Sometimes, I like to refer to prayer as pouring out our hearts before the throne of grace and mercy. We can always trust God as we empty ourselves in prayer, knowing that God loves us and will complete the transaction by pouring the Holy Spirit into our lives for her to mingle with our spirits and confirm God's love and goodness within and among us. Many people of all different faith traditions have testified to this and have relied on God, as another Psalm says, "our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."⁶

God wants only the best for all humanity.

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that [God] had said that [God] would do unto them; and [God] did it not. (*Jonah 3:10 KJV*)

The allegory of Jonah in the Bible is less about the *whale* and more about the *inclusiveness* of God's universal love for all humanity. The parable ends with a story about how Jonah is so angry with God for not unleashing wrath on the community of Ninevah. God illustrates mercy by causing a plant to grow quickly over Jonah to shade him while he sat in the sun. Then, a worm came and killed the plant. The whole episode ends with God rebuking Jonah for caring more about the plant than the people and animals Jonah had hoped God would destroy.

Some faith groups hear Jesus' invitation in this passage to "repent ye, and believe the gospel"⁷ as an *or else* threat. But one time, the disciples asked Jesus if they should call down fire from

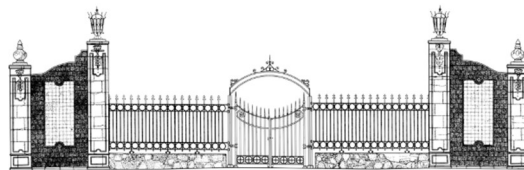
heaven on a community of people who had rejected them, and Jesus reminded them that his whole purpose was to save everyone, not to destroy anyone.⁸ A lot of people apparently have not read that part yet -- just like how a lot of people still haven't gotten the complete memo of John 3:16 because they only hear it in isolation from verse 17, so let's remember that together:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.⁹

Conclusion

Humanity has been invited into an ongoing holy conversation ever since Jesus announced, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."¹⁰ Everyone is invited to join this eternal spiritual chat room and to engage as participants in exploring all the ins and outs of a universal faith community that spans all barriers of time and space and life and death. Beliefs, expressions, and practices will always differ among everyone as they always have, and people will always continue to associate and organize around similar ideas and objectives. We are all called and sent to love one another into the sacred community of God's family.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



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Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson

January 21, 2024, at Briensburg UMC

Bible Readings for the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, Revised Common Lectionary, Year B
Jonah 3:1-5 & 10, Psalm 62:5-12, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20

Acknowledgments

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Notes

¹ World Council of Churches. "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," 2024. *World Council of Churches*.
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² Hebrews 10:24-25 (KJV).

³ Cecil Frances Alexander. "Jesus Calls Us, O'er the Tumult," 1852. *Hymnary*.
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⁴ John 13:17 (KJV).

⁵ John 13:17 (GNT).

⁶ Psalm 46:1 (KJV).

⁷ Mark 1:15 (KJV).

⁸ Luke 9:51-56.

⁹ John 3:16-17 (KJV).

¹⁰ Mark 1:15 (KJV).

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