

Sermon

9 May 2021

Acts 10:44-48 John 15:9-17

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM

Represent

Here are the take-aways from today's scripture readings:

1. Is it not up to us to decide who is worthy of God's love and who is not?
2. We are called to love everyone as Jesus loves us, his friends.
3. There is no greater way to show that love than to lay down your life for your friends.

Let's unpack those, OK?

The idea that it is not up to us to decide who is worthy of God's love comes from our reading from the books of Acts. Our first lesson today was just the end of a longer story. Listen up.

Peter, one of Jesus's apostles, has a dream about all kinds of animals. In the dream, Peter hears a voice telling him to eat the animals even though some of them are considered unclean by Jewish Law. When Peter protests, the voice tells him God has made them clean and humans cannot say something isn't worthy if God says it IS worthy.

Meanwhile, a Roman army officer, Cornelius, has a dream instructing him to seek out Peter. Although Cornelius, his family, and household are not Jewish they love God, pray a lot, and help those in need. Peter and his Jewish friends are invited to visit Cornelius. Peter and Cornelius are both surprised to realize they have both had dreams telling them to take some chances and make some changes.

Peter then preaches an inspired sermon in which he proclaims, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

As the sermon proceeds, the Holy Spirit descends on the listeners and it is clear that everyone, including Cornelius and all his non-Jewish family and friends have been touched. There is speaking in tongues and worshipping God!

Peter then baptizes everyone in attendance! He asks, "can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The amazing thing about this story is that the Jews REALLY DID BELIEVE God showed partiality. As Christianity was getting started, many thought Jesus had only come to save them.... the Jews.

Last week we heard the story of Philip baptizing another “outsider” – the man from Ethiopia. As Christianity grows, the Holy Spirit is directing the apostles to bring everyone into this new faith of Christianity. Baptism for everyone!

Peter said it. “God shows no partiality.”

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus continues to share his ideas about abiding in him and God which we heard last week. Jesus tells his disciples – who he now defines as “friends” – that you can abide in him IF you follow his commandments. And in today’s passage Jesus is extremely clear about those commandments. “Love one another as I have loved you.” And just to make sure we understand what he’s talking about Jesus adds, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends.”

Jesus is telling his friends that he is going to die for their salvation. That’s how much Jesus loves them. So, buckle up! Jesus calls us to love one another in the same way. Lay down your life for your friends.

God shows no partiality.

Jesus tells us to love one another as much as he loves us.

That love is displayed by giving up your life for each other.

Wait a minute. Give up my very life for someone else. Is Jesus serious? It is totally possible that someday we may be called to give up our mortal life for the good of someone or something other than Ourselves. But in the meantime, perhaps Jesus is telling us we need to be able to give up something extremely important in our lives in order to show our love for our fellow humans. We are called to let a self-centered part of ourselves die.

Maybe it’s something as simple a material possessions or money you may be asked to give up.

Or perhaps it’s something much more difficult....as difficult as a long-held belief that excludes others from being fully welcomed into the household of Christ.

Do you think noisy children should be taken out of church? Maybe you need to loosen up that idea because God shows no partiality.

Do you think someone who supports a political candidate who do NOT support is not worthy of worshipping like you? With you? God doesn’t show partiality.

Do you think a member of the queer community isn’t worthy of God’s love? You need to let that idea die because God shows no partiality.

Do you think someone of another race is inferior to the race to which you belong? Nope. God shows no partiality.

Do think believe only one gender is allowed at the altar? Does everything in church have to be done exactly in a certain way? Do you not like the way the seating was arranged? The snacks at coffee hour? Who won a local, state, or national election? Do you disagree with a news channel? It doesn't matter because God shows no partiality.

Jesus calls us to let all of that negative and exclusionary energy die....in order that we may love each other as much as God loves us.

We must let go of all those ideas which say someone – for whatever reason – is “less than” or “not worthy”. If Peter learned God shows no partiality, then we must do the same.

Of course, this doesn't mean you don't stand up for what you believe to be for the betterment of the world and your friends and neighbors. It means that we shouldn't exclude someone from God's redeeming love because we don't like their views or opinions or how they conduct their lives.

(This section in italics was added for the LGBTQ+ Evening Prayer liturgy held in the evening of 5/9/21).

This week I had the extreme privilege to be interviewed by a high-school senior. They were working on a senior thesis or project. The topic of their project was spirituality, religion, and the LGBTQ community. When they contacted St. Mark's to speak to a clergy member, they were delighted to learn a deacon who identifies as gay was available to interview. “I didn't know that was an option!” they said.

The interview ended up being a delightful hour-long conversation with this high-school senior. They asked me what advice I would give to a queer person who discovered their house of worship did not accept them.

My answer: “Get out. Leave.”

The interviewer was taken aback. They paused for a moment and asked why I would give such a definitive answer.

I replied, “No one should be asked to be someone other than their true, authentic self, the person God created them to be, in order to worship that same God. Find a new house of worship which will embrace you for who you are.”

In this case of laying down your life for a friend, I believe Jesus is referring to those who do not accept the queer individual – not the queer person being told they are not worthy.

Because why? God does not show partiality. Neither should we.

So, Deacon David. You started this sermon with three bullet point takeaways. But what are we supposed to do? How can we not show partiality, love our neighbor as Jesus loves us,

and be willing to let go of our lives (or a selfish, small-minded portion of it) to demonstrate that love.

To answer that question, I'm going to return to one of my favorite life coaches and theologians, Ru Paul Charles and his amazing reality television program, RuPaul's Drag Race. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the format of this show.... traditionally, men (most often gay) dress up in flamboyant female attire (that's called a drag queen) and compete in various challenges to come in first and win a prize.

This past season featured the first transgender contestant. Gottmik was her name, and she was a transgender male who now expresses their art through being a drag queen.

Drag Queens are referred to by the pronoun "she", so I am not misgendering Gottmik.

In her final interview, Gottmik talked about the difficulty and pressure she felt being the first transgender contestant in the competition. She felt she had to represent the entire transgender community – varied and vast as it is. She felt she had to be perfect all the time. But halfway through the season, Gottmik realized all one must do to represent is this:

Be yourself and Show Up.

Be yourself and Show Up.

To represent today's lessons from the scripture...to represent Christianity and Jesus....to represent the communities to which we belong.... all we are asked to do is be ourselves and show up.

Be your very best self – loving, caring, accepting, patient, fierce, unique, authentic and willing to listen with an open heart and an open mind.

Show up - when you can, as you can, however you are, in a good mood or bad mood, and even when you aren't totally feeling it.

We will fail. We won't always be our best selves. We'll sometime stay in bed (literally AND figuratively) instead of getting out there and representing as best we can. We will occasionally fall back into old patterns of self-centeredness and thinking of some people as "the other."

But that is OK. Jesus died for us with all our human frailties and mistakes because we are loved THAT MUCH.

God shows no partiality. Let us work to do the same.

Represent. Be yourself. Show up.