

***How to Be A Better Lover***  
Matthew 20:29-34 July 15, 2018

The motto of the United Church of Christ is, “God Is Still Speaking”.

The point is simple: God didn’t just stop speaking to us when the final period was penned at the end of last the sentence of the Bible.

No.

God still speaks through scripture.

How?

Through scripture we learn what is important to God, what God did and where God was leading his people back then, so that we can continue those ways, today.

That famous WWJD, “What would Jesus do?” was popularized by a congregational minister whose book *In His Steps* challenged readers to discover in the Gospels the kinds of things Jesus did so that they could do likewise.

Often the WWJD gets trivialized into some moralistic teaching, but the Jesus of the Gospels actually wasn’t very big on moralizing, but he was very big on compassion.

The Gospel of John opens by saying that Jesus came to earth full of grace and truth.

Following that requires a difficult balance:

All truth, and no grace, you become a hard person.

All grace, and no truth and become a weak, indecisive person.

But if I have to err, then I would rather be too gracious.

Grace is messy, it gets personal, and it gets controversial – as we’ll see in today’s passage.

Sometimes you hear that Jesus went after the marginalized of his culture, but that isn't quite right.

What Jesus actually did was move the margins.

Jesus got up close and personally compassionate with women, lepers, Gentiles, tax collectors and others whom society scorned and marginalized.

He went out of his way to show that they, too, are children of God.

Jesus wasn't paternalistic, condescending or charitable to them.

He didn't leave them on the outside – he moved the margins to include them in the family of God.

That example led our congregational forefathers to become the first denomination to ordain Native Americans, African Americans, women and gay people as pastors.

It also led them to bring cooperation and understanding between competing and sometimes hostile Christian denominations – that “they all may be one” as John 17:21 says.

OK, that is all well and good, but how does the rubber meet the road for you and me here in the San Fernando Valley?

I ask that because step into any room and ask for a show of hands, “Who here is in favor of compassion?” everyone's hand will go up.

Everyone loves to quote the love and mercy scriptures ... but disciples try to live those commands, and Matthew 20 is a good place to start because it gives us four principles for being better lovers.

Let's walk through this passage.

*Matthew 20:29-30 As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”*

By the way, Jericho is the first town that the Hebrew people came to when they crossed the Jordan River to enter the Holy Land.

It was already an old city, probably 9,000 years old, when Jesus passed through that day.

Jericho sits 846 feet below sea level in a hot and barren landscape at the base of the hills that Jesus was about to ascend to Jerusalem.

So, four principles for being a better lover:

**First, Jesus heard.**

*Matthew 20:32 Jesus stopped in his tracks and called to them.*

Jesus was spiritually alert, so he heard the beggars' call through the noise of the crowd and he sensed the pain in their hoarse voices.

Frankly, most of us are largely oblivious to the pain that is all around us.

We tune it out ... or we never tune-in to it in the first place.

A mentor of mine from seminary said that the mission for his Arizona church was to find a hurt and heal it.

Not a bad mission for a church or for us ... but first we have to hear the hurt.

So, maybe our biggest enemy of being great lovers is our busyness and distraction.

You come home from work, you're tired, so you sit down, check-in with Facebook or Reddit and then you tumble down the rabbit hole of links and you become oblivious to the frustration in your wife's voice.

You push down the aisles at Smart and Final focused on your shopping list, never noticing the people limping around you or the haggard lady returning foods to the shelves because she can't afford to adequately feed her family.

Great lovers are aware ... Jesus heard the beggars over the noisy crowd and over what must have been his own anxiety about what awaited him in Jerusalem.

**Second, he stopped.**

But he didn't leave it at that ... he stopped.

You're exhausted from your commute up the 405, then you rush to the backyard to water the plants that are browning in our heatwave, with the last bit of your energy you fix dinner - so that once again you postpone checking on your neighbor who lost their spouse six months ago.

That's exactly what I've done with my own neighbor.

But, if we're going to become great lovers like Jesus, then we have to develop the spiritual discipline of being interrupted.

*Philippians 2:4 Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

There are lots of books that use the metaphor of following in the footsteps of Jesus.

But I think a more meaningful metaphor might be to follow in the steps of Jesus, because that is when he showed compassion.

He stopped to have dinner with sinners, he stopped to heal the lepers, and here he stopped to listen to the blind beggars whom the crowd is trying to silence.

Vicki needed help when Jimmy was being released from the hospital a couple of weeks ago.

She couldn't watch over him and his breathing apparatus while also driving from UCLA to home, so she called Janette and Gerre.

I know that they were both busy, and that Gerre had just gotten home from work and really wanted to chill.

But, they dropped everything, fought the traffic over the Sepulveda pass.

Janette drove Jimmy and Vicki in her van while Gerre drove Vicki's car home.

That was stopping like Jesus stopped.

Tom Kaser did the same thing last Friday.

If you want to be used by God, you have to get used to being interrupted.

### **Third, Jesus asked.**

Matthew 20:32 *Jesus stopped and called them. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.*

Jesus did not assume, he let them clarify their needs.

He did not say, I’m the great paternalistic fixer who knows all your needs and how to solve all your problems.

That was often the approach of Europeans who tried to “fix” the backwards African people – and the result was the destruction of economies and social systems that left the people dependent on perpetual support.

And on an individual level, I can’t tell you how many hours of marital counseling I’ve facilitated where the woman feels that her husband doesn’t care because when she describes something she’s going through he cuts her off, gives his opinion of how to fix her problem, and then walks away.

Over the months or years, her bitterness grows because she doesn’t feel heard.

Meanwhile, tensions grow because the man feels that his wife is shutting down.

He’s done his best, but it’s not being appreciated.

I know, it’s a cliché, but often all the woman wanted was to be heard and understood.

Learning the skill of listening, learning some probing questions to be sure you are hearing a person’s feelings, and giving a few minutes of uninterrupted attention can do miracles.

Love is a choice and love always starts by choosing to listen.

### **Forth, Jesus showed compassion.**

Matthew 20:34 *Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes.*

When I turn my full attention to my spouse or my friend or whomever, that is a gift of compassion.

So many people don't feel heard, they feel powerless, disregarded, of little value.

That's what's behind a lot of the anger in society today.

Millions of people feel like they are the ones sitting on the side of the road helplessly watching their livelihoods slip away and no one cares.

Millions feel like they're shoved to the sidelines while their values are hijacked.

In millions of marriages, people feel that their opinion is overlooked.

What is people's natural reaction to feeling that no one hears their frustration?

Anger.

Often, we don't notice any of those people's pain because they only exist in the periphery of our awareness.

Or, we may shut down when we hear their anger because, after all, who wants to be assaulted by anger?

So, we tune them out or condemn them for their anger, meaning that their pain is ignored and they are marginalized.

On an individual level, often the people who need the most love are the most challenging to love.

Often it is the most obnoxious, demanding person who needs the most love.

You never allow yourself to become their victim, and you can't fix their deep problems, but you can show God's grace by giving them your full attention, and by recognizing the pain behind their words and attitudes.

The "thought of the week" I put on a recent church email was, "Let my heart be broken by the things that break God's heart."

What's God going to ask when we meet in heaven?

Well, one thing we know for sure is that it will be about how we lived our life mission of loving God, loving our self, and loving others.

Jesus says that some who expect to be greeted with open arms will be disappointed, while others will be cheered because they gave of themselves to the needy and oppressed.

Matthew 25: 37-40 *“Then the righteous will answer (God), ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’*

*“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”*

When we walk into a gathering, it is natural to wonder how we look, what kind of impression we are making, or if we are going to be able to sit next to someone who is interesting.

But what if, at least sometimes, we looked for that person who is sitting alone, the person others ignore, or the person who is always complaining?

What if we gave that person a few minutes of our full attention, hearing the pain and loneliness behind their words?

As Jesus walked through town, these two guys kept shouting over the commotion of the crowd.

The crowd tried to quiet them –possibly because it felt like the blind beggars were being disrespectful.

Matthew 20:31 *The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!*

“Rebuked” is the same word that describes how Jesus confronted evil spirits - that is how intense was the crowd’s response to the blind men.

People in power place a high value on civility: don’t raise your voice, keep everything respectful.

We all prefer civility; it is polite, calm and nonthreatening.

But out of desperation, people who feel powerless, alienated or ignored will shout their demands for attention and mercy – but often the powerful only hear their disrespect.

Now, do you think that people will forget their pain or forget their suffering just because they're told to be quiet and not make a fuss?

Of course not.

The greatest gift you can give someone is your attention, because your attention is your time, and your time is your life.

So, every time you give someone your attention it is like you are giving them a piece of your life.

### **Building Your Character for Eternity**

It is easy to love lovable people.

It feels great to give to people who are appreciative.

But we build our character as we love difficult people.

We build our character as we give our attention to people we'd normally avoid.

That is the character we will carry beyond this life and into eternity.

Hebrews 6:10 *God will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them.*

I really learned the power of unconditional attention at the first church I attended.

It was a big church down in Huntington Beach, and the senior minister, Dr. Peggy Bassett, had a practice after church of greeting people at the doorway.

There often would be a line of couple of a dozen people who'd want to share something with her.

Peggy would give each person 30 seconds or a minute of her absolute, nonjudgmental, loving attention.

Her assistant Joan would silently stand next to her to jot down notes of whatever might need to be remembered or followed up on ... and people would leave feeling blessed.

30 seconds or a minute, and then the line would step forward and the person who'd just spoken with Peggy would walk away beaming.

A minute of Dr. Peggy's full, loving attention felt like a gift.

That is a gift you can give others, too.

God is still speaking, and He is waiting to speak through you today by the attention you give to those who are hurting.