

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 29 November

Children's Talk: You Have Done it to Me

Last week, Mr. Smith talked about how everyone has their own relationship with the Lord. Each and every one of us has to be working on that relationship for ourselves.

But there is something hard about making a relationship with the Lord: have any of you actually seen Him in person? I don't think many people have. But to make a relationship with someone, we need to be able to do things for them.

The key has to do with our relationships with other people: as we form relationships with other people, we also make a relationship with the Lord. In fact, Jesus Himself told people that, unknowingly, they had already been doing things for Him:

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:34-40)

Now I have here a few (not all) of the things that Jesus mentioned. Food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. The amazing thing that Jesus is saying is that if someone gives me this food, and I eat, it's just like giving it to the Lord. And the same with the drink and the clothes. All you see is just me, eating, drinking, and getting warm. But secretly, they are being done to the Lord too.

That's not just true of food and water and clothes. Any good thing you do for another person is like doing it for the Lord too.

The more we build healthy relationships with other people, the more we are building a healthy relationship with the Lord. And the healthier our relationship with the Lord is, the better we will get at having healthy relationships with other people. The one supports and leads to the other.

Building Relationships, Part 2: Looking Outward

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

29 November, 2020

A community is an interconnected web of relationships. There is no such thing as a community of one. Nor can there be a community of many individuals if no relationships exist among them. A church community is no different: we are only a community to the extent that we have and create relationships. As a church community, the most important relationship is the one that we have with the Lord. It is this relationship that defines all others in a church. Malcolm talked about this last week, and how to form a more active, living relationship with the Lord. This is something that we all need to be working on. This week, though, we turn our minds to all the other relationships we have or could have: the ones that require us to look outside of ourselves and reach out into the lives of other people.

These types of relationships are infinitely varied, but as a church community, we at New Church Westville have identified four that we find to be particularly important, namely, relationships with each other, within marriage, with children, and with other communities. These four types of relationships, along with a relationship with the Lord, are described in the vision statement for New Church Westville. Today we are going to explore how we can work on these relationships, and even how we can push beyond them.

Our need and ability to work on each of these relationships arises directly out of our individual relationships with the Lord. A community of people who each love the Lord (which is what a church really is), must also love the people that the Lord loves. The Teachings of the New Church explain how this works in heaven:

The relatedness of the whole of heaven to the Lord, and of every single member to Him alone, on the whole and in specifics, gives rise to order, union, mutual love, and happiness; for in this case individuals are looking to the welfare and happiness of all, and all to that of individuals. (*Secrets of Heaven* §551)

Heaven works because in looking to the Lord alone, in all things, each individual member is lead to work to the betterment of everyone else; and when each individual member is looking to the betterment of everyone else, each individual receives from the whole everything that he or she needs to flourish.

That's how things work in heaven. Here on Earth we are much more of a work in progress. I am sure that there are many people right now, associated with New Church Westville, who are not receiving from the Church community what they need in order to flourish. If we think through those 4 categories I mentioned we will be able to see where we might be falling short, and why if we each work on building those relationships up, the individuals in our community will be better supported.

The first type of relationship is simply that which exists between members of our own church community. Our vision statement says that, "We connect with each other, reaching out with warmth and sincerity to offer help, support, and guidance." If we do not do this, there will be people who may attend church and participate in events, but feel lost, alone, isolated, and unwanted. Creating relationships means not just putting on a smile and being kind, it means actively reaching out to other people in the community, including them, offering support, inquiring into their well-being, and befriending them.

The second type of relationship is in marriage. Our vision statement says that, "We support marriage as the most valuable human relationship, aiding people in preparation for marriage, strengthening existing marriages, and supporting marriages in crisis." If we do not do this, marriages may fall apart or stagnate, families may suffer, strong, new marriages will not be created, and there will be confusion around how to navigate relationships. Creating relationships means not just having married people around, but working first and foremost on your relationship with your spouse, or significant other, or working as a single person towards having a marriage relationship. It means for older couple to support younger ones, and for friends to support each other through hard times in their marriages.

The third type of relationship is with children. Our vision statement says that, "We care for children, educating them to see the Lord's truth and nurturing them to make their own commitment to follow Him. We support parents in raising their children to follow the Lord and His commandments. We support children in finding their own sense of dignity and in developing their ability to form meaningful relationships in adult life." If we do not do this, the children of our community will be lost in the shuffle, will not have a meaningful connection to the church, and will miss out on getting the best spiritual foundation we might give them. Creating relationships means not just having children around, but actively supporting and mentoring children in age appropriate ways; helping them feel welcomed and wanted; ushering them into adulthood when the time is right; as well as supporting each other as mothers and fathers. Parenting is not something that has to be an isolating job.

The fourth and final type of relationship is the one we have with the broader community. Our vision statement says, "We have open arms to the broader community around us and want people to come join us. We are involved in the community around us and we do things to serve the people in the broader community." If we do not do this, we will become arrogant and judgmental; we will be isolated from our neighbours; we will restrict who can benefit from our beautiful teachings, we will be off-putting and alienate the very people we could have served. Creating relationships does not just mean having friends outside of the church. It means actively reaching out as a church community and serving, inviting people into and encouraging them to participate, making them feel welcome, and supporting them in their personal spiritual journeys. These descriptions of relationships only scratch the surface; but if each of us, from our own, individual relationship with the Lord, begins to work on these relationships, we will create a stronger, wiser, more loving church.

But something I want to spend time talking about is pushing outside of our usual comfort zones with these relationships. Although each one has some element of loving others outside of self in it, we can still adopt a self-centred approach to relationships. Jesus clearly teaches us that we are supposed to look beyond simply the people who love us and are already part of our relationships:

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:46-48)

The Lord expects us to do more than simply love those who already love us, and reach out beyond those who are already our brothers. If we do not then we can end

up loving ourselves even in our relationships with other people. The Teachings of the New Church put it this way:

...whoever loves himself, loves also those who belong to him; by whom are meant here, in particular, children and grand-children, and, in general, all who make one with himself, and whom he calls his own. Loving these is the same as loving one's self; for a man beholds them, as it were, in himself, and himself in them. (*The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* §67)

So if we turn back to all the relationships we have talked about so far, what would it look like to go above and beyond just loving them for our own sakes?

In the case of our own church community it would mean not being content with only reaching out to the people you are already familiar and comfortable with. I know that this one is a tough one for me: I have enough friends as it is, I don't need more! Not to mention that it is so much easier to maintain a relationship than it is to build new ones. This doesn't mean that you have to be best friends with everyone in the church. But it is a call to reach out more to people you normally wouldn't.

In the case of marriage, it would mean shifting from thinking in terms of what you and your spouse can do for each other, and looking towards what your marriage could offer to the community. How does the fact that you are married benefit the world? The Lord instituted marriage not just because it helps the people in it, but because married couples actually have a lot to offer that they could not as individuals. Alternatively, you could also think of ways that you can influence and support other people's marriages. I think one of the hardest and most awkward things to do is bring up a troubled relationship with someone. We, or at least I, shy away from exposure to that level of vulnerability. And yet if we are to support people we need the courage to lean into that vulnerability and be with the mess that comes with any complex relationship.

In the case of children it would mean thinking beyond your own children or family and thinking of how to make church a space that welcomes and nurtures all children. Or in the case of those of us without children, or whose children have grown, thinking consciously of how we support parents and children. I know I enjoy being an uncle-like figure to children, because it means all of the fun, none of the responsibility. But really I need to remind myself that my influence on children and support of parents can be quite strong. It matters that I support children growing into responsible, conscientious, kind people. That's a lot harder than just seeing other people's kids as entertainment.

In the case of the broader community outside of the church it might look like seeking out communities of people that you are uncomfortable around. And doing things that take effort and hard work with little external payoff. Certainly the amount of work that we as New Church Westville have been doing to support El Gibbor Kitchen recently has been a fantastic example of exactly this. This kind of work brings us into contact with individuals and communities that we would never ordinarily interact with, and in some cases would be tempted to ridicule or condemn. But by doing the work of reaching out we can forge a relationship that honours the humanity even of those who are most different from us.

Once again, the variety is infinite. But the call from the Lord is to look beyond the relationships that are easy, that come naturally, that are already fully formed, and build those relationships that pull us outside of ourselves.

I suspect that the topic of today's sermon could bring some sense of accusation or guilt: as if you are not doing enough to build relationships, and should feel bad about it; and yet, since the work of relationships is never done, it could seem like an impossible chore, something to add to everything else you are trying to do in life. But that is not at all the point. The point is not that somehow you should be all things to all people. But rather, that it is worth trying to push, slowly but surely, outside of your comfort zone and pay attention to relationships that have perhaps been neglected by other people. And as we sometimes forget, genuine relationships are a source of true happiness. Rather than seeing relationships as tasks to be checked off, let's remember that all the happiness of heaven, and so of our little church on Earth, is from the free sharing of joy from person to person, passed along through a never-ending web of loving relationships.