

How Can We Practice Mutuality?

People of God – people sourced by immeasurable Love, I invite us to wonder together this morning: **How can we practice mutuality?** That is, how will we practice sharing our feelings, actions, and relationships between ourselves and each other? Love has gathered us on this Connection Sunday. We are together via livestream and here with this land which has been in relationship with people for millennia before us and will be in relationship with a learning community for years to come.

Facing toward the season of autumn, we connect today as children and youth, choir, people – embodying life as a church – learning, growing, relating, and serving. As we dive in, we keep our newly adopted mission in mind: *“Moved by deepening relationships with God and each other, we unite with the wider community to transform our values into action.”* It sounds like an echo of the scripture! What better time to wonder about how we can practice mutuality within every widening circles – in the intimacy of home and friends, at work and school, and as our church interfaces with our wider community!

As we move into this time of wondering, let’s first pause to pray – with the geese! Holy Spirit, we long for your challenging, affirming energy to open us in new and fuller ways. Expose us to honesty and guide us toward integrity and mutuality. Guide the meditations of our hearts and minds. Amen.

Friends in faith, our sacred texts for today convey two of the most uninhibited voices in Christian scriptures – the author of James and the woman with whom Jesus interacts in the gospel text from Mark.

The author of James speaks in the voice of a parent, teacher, coach who is persistent, insistent, and zealous about influencing a person's behavior. The writer challenges us while also conveying trust in our potential for living out our faith with integrity and mutuality.

Two slices of James' exhortation strike me as relevant to our journeys toward mutuality – that practice of sharing our feelings, actions, and relationships. Essentially, mutuality is a sacred countercultural force that pushes against isolationism.

We first heard James's thoughts on favoritism. The author paints what was likely an all-too-common misstep that they and their contemporaries made – that of letting their attention and affection be drawn to the rich, the powerful, the popular neighbor instead of to the humble and struggling neighbor. If (and when) our energy goes to gratifying those in power instead of connecting in mutuality with those who have less in the world's eyes, then James asks us: *“Haven't you in such a case discriminated in your hearts? Haven't you set yourselves up like judges who hand down corrupt decisions? Listen, dear sisters and brothers: didn't God choose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom promised to those who love God? Yet you've treated poor people shamefully! You're acting rightly, however, if you fulfill the venerable law of the scriptures: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'”* When we turn to the gospel reading, we will find examples of neighbors loving one another and themselves – that is, living their faith out through a practice of mutuality.

James also writes, *“What good is it, my siblings, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?”*

If a person is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

We encounter pain, loss, and struggle in every direction we turn. We can consider these faithfully strident words about the death of faith through inaction within our intimate contexts of family and friends or within our daily experiences at work and school. I invite us to consider James' words in light of the most recent horrific and preventable school shooting in our nation, which occurred at Apalachee High School in Georgia last week. Thoughts and prayers have some measure of spiritual power in the spread of kind energy, but they are not faith in action. How can you as a private citizen or we as a church become engaged (stick our necks out, giving our time and energy) to the struggle to mitigate gun violence in our nation? Will we let our faith be lifeless by wringing our hands and our hearts and turning away from this and other unjust crises that devalue, diminish, and end lives? Or will we give to our faith the hands, feet, and voices it needs in order to stretch, breathe and live? Might we build mutuality in our struggles for justice – mutuality both within our congregation and, to again quote our mission statement, *"unit[ing] with the wider community to transform our values into action?"*

We also heard from the gospel of Mark this morning. Mark does not fill awkward moments with smooth language. Mark portrays each narrative moment with blunt honesty. We read of Jesus having two distinct encounters, each with a person seeking healing for themselves or another.

Time and again, I am moved viscerally and spiritually by the encounter between Jesus and the woman who approached him on behalf of her struggling daughter, seeking the compassionate healing touch that had built Jesus' reputation as a healer. I believe that this encounter challenged Jesus to become a more faithful, loving and humble leader – one capable of modeling mutuality. Hear again a portion of the first encounter: *“a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’”*

The woman took Jesus to task - opening him to see his own hypocrisy in perpetuating the cultural stereotype that his own Jewish people were more worthy of healing than she when he regularly preached and taught about a God who loves indiscriminately. Jesus models for us how to let Love open us, expose us to the light of honesty, and guide us toward a life marked by deeper integrity. When the woman exposed Jesus' hypocrisy, he must have taken a deep breath to avoid becoming defensive as he recognized the wisdom of her audacious, godly (that is Love-empowered) hope for healing. He allowed the light and power of Love to negate his initial bias against her as a cultural other to hold at arm's length.

The encounter between Jesus and the woman encourages us to be opened by people sharing honest observations (sometimes affirmative, sometimes critical) to help us see when we are and when we are not acting in alignment with our values.

I wonder, who in your life holds a mirror to your behavior, helping you see it more clearly so that you can grow?

One key aspect of active discipleship is integrity. Integrity can mean internal consistency in a person's values and beliefs, and it also means consistency between a person's actions and the values they hold internally.

Carl Jung was a renowned Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist of the late nineteenth early twentieth century who developed many influential psychological concepts including extroversion versus introversion among others. Jung once made this statement: *"You are what you do, not what you say you'll do."* *"You are what you do, not what you say you'll do."* What, then, does each of us say we will do? Living out our lives with integrity as disciples of Jesus does involve a component of non-action – of developing self-awareness.

How might you develop more self-awareness of a kind that will support your desire to put your faith into action? Archie Smith Jr., a professor at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, writes this: *"We can begin by embracing the whole of ourselves and taking responsibility for our constructive and destructive potentials"* (*Feasting on The Word*). *"We can begin by embracing the whole of ourselves and taking responsibility for our constructive and destructive potentials."* Words from Archie Smith Jr.

Let's reflect for a moment, then, on our own constructive and destructive potentials. It is sometimes easiest to reflect on our destructive potential. What are some of our behaviors that stray from God's law – the things we do that are outside of the way of Love? We can think about destructive behavior on two levels.

There are behaviors we use to intentionally hurt another – the mean tone of voice, look in our eye, facial expression, or body language that we know will hurt someone and build or reinforce a barrier between us. **I wonder: who is someone with whom you intersect with regularly in your home, school, workplace or neighborhood whom you find it very difficult to love?** Perhaps you even find it difficult to withhold meanness toward that person. Why is it this way between you and that one? I invite you to wonder in the coming days what alternative dynamics we could create within that relationship.

We can also explore our destructive behaviors on another level. There are things that all of us do that are destructive of relationship or moments even when we don't intend to harm another with our behavior.

I offer one of my favorite illustration from a mid-'90's comedy film called *Tommy Boy*. In a particular scene, a young automotive parts salesman (the late comedian Chris Farley) interacts nervously with a powerful CEO of an automotive parts company (Dan Aykroyd). They've unexpectedly met in an elevator as the young salesman is on his way to a big conversation with that CEO. Just before this scene, the young salesman nervously rubbed a taxicab air freshener all over himself to disguise his body odor. The following conversation ensues in the elevator, begun by the high-powered CEO:

Went a little heavy on the pine tree perfume there, kid?

Sir, it's a taxicab air freshener.

Good, you've pinpointed it. Step two is washing it out.

Now, perhaps the CEO was a little hard on the nervous salesman, but I appreciate the lucidity of the interaction.

Too often, we stop after step one of realizing that we have a behavior that frustrates others and do not move beyond defensiveness and forward to step two of making an effort to modify our frustrating behavior. I invite you to consider in the coming days: **what habit of yours do know frustrates others but you have not made an effort to modify?** Let's not use the excuse that it is ok to have a slightly destructive behavior because we don't mean for it to hurt anyone. Instead, let's wonder what keeps us stuck in those habits and consider making a change.

Finally, let's turn to the good news of our constructive ways of being. Again, from Archie Smith, Jr.: *"We can begin by embracing the whole of ourselves and taking responsibility for our constructive and destructive potentials."*

God's Word of Love dwells within each of us and finds unique expression through each of us if we offer up our constructive potential – the best of us. The best we know that we have in our experiences, skills, our interests and energy – those are our vehicles for God's Love.

Collectively as a congregation and individually, will we welcome God to expose us to the light of honesty (as did the woman in conversation with Jesus) and guide us toward lives of deeper integrity to which the author of James calls us. This is how our faith can be transformed into action. God's active, transformative Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church | Bayport, MN
September 8, 2024 (16th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
James 2:1-10,14-17; Mark 7:24-37