

Live and Learn, Learn and Live!

[Text - Matthew 11:28-30]

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September 7, 2014

This week, as I was thinking about beginning a new season of Christian Education, I thought it'd be interesting to see what Jesus has to say on the subject of *learning*. After all, Jesus was a renown teacher - a remarkable Rabbi whose words, stories, and actions have inspired countless individuals throughout the centuries. So I figured he'd have a lot to say about *learning*; but as I quickly learned, he really doesn't. There are only three times in all the Gospel accounts where Jesus speaks about *learning*. One, is a fairly straightforward statement found in *Luke*: "Learn the lesson of the fig tree - when it puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near." Well that's true, but not much to work with. Fortunately, Jesus' other two references to *learning* are not only much more meaty, but also highly appropriate for us today. As we begin our new season of learning, these two references *about* learning found in *Matthew* essentially summarize what it is that Jesus calls you and me to learn.

In *Matthew* chapter nine, right after Jesus calls Matthew the tax-collector to follow him, Jesus joins with him and some of his friends for dinner. When the religious authorities who are scrutinizing Jesus' behavior see this, they immediately criticize what he's doing. They ask his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and other known "sinners?" [It seems that someone's a little too *chicken* to ask Jesus directly!] But Jesus hears their complaint, and he directly responds: "Go and *learn* what this means, 'I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice' - for I did not come to call the righteous, but to welcome sinners!"

"Go and learn what this means." What this *means*, is that neither God nor Jesus are impressed with people who sanctimoniously perform religious rituals, yet do not practice steadfast compassion in their relationships with others. Citing the prophet Hosea, Jesus echoes the essential teaching of all the Old Testament prophets: That the Holy

One's core desire is that people treat one another with fairness and compassion. Period! Jesus then tells those self-righteous individuals who still don't get it, to get to work and figure it out. "Go and *learn* what this means!" And what better way to learn about openhearted compassion than to actually practice it! To forgive and welcome and love those people who need it the most - just like Jesus does!

Jesus' second reference to *learning* in Matthew is from today's New Testament reading: "Come unto me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and *learn* from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Much of what burdens the people of First Century Israel, is a heavy-handed institutionalized religion that pushes people down, and keeps God "up there" - as a distant and dreadful judge - One who is just waiting for you to make a mistake. And as most of us know, it's extremely difficult to live fully and freely, and to not mess things up, if we're preoccupied with the fear of doing something wrong. So Jesus invites us to "learn from him" how to see and experience the Holy One in a wholly different way - as One who gives us this marvelous gift of Life and then asks only, that we share it with one another - fully, freely, and fairly. In other words, that we learn to live together as compassionate children of our One Heavenly Parent.

Jesus lives his life as a genuine Child of God, with a holiness and a wholeness that is free from human judgments, yet fully human and fully aware of the problems and concerns of those around him. So what you and I can learn from Jesus, is how to relate to God and to others in ways that enhance both *our* lives *and* the lives of those around us. As a self-aware individual - completely secure in his relationship with his Divine Source - Jesus is able to relate to others right where they are, with a truly open mind and a graciously compassionate heart. By doing so, Jesus helps them to open-up and embrace that same Spirit of compassion, wholeness, and joy. Personally, I know that when I'm feeling safe and secure - not worrying about being judged - is when I'm at my best. I can relax. I'm much more productive. I take time to appreciate Life, and I pay closer

attention to the lives of those around me. As Saint Paul says, I can “rejoice with those who rejoice.” I can “weep with those who weep.” I can be at peace with others, because I’m at peace within myself. And it all flows from the awareness of my unshakable relationship with the Ultimate Source of Life.

As Marcus Borg reminds us in our Continuing Testament, “Beliefs have little ability to change our lives. One can believe all the right things and remain a jerk....” [I’ve been there, done that, and am still working on reducing the frequency!] However, Borg continues, “The Christian life is about a *relationship* to the God to whom the tradition points. What matters is the relationship, for it can and will transform lives.”

The Church’s *critical* mission, is to help bring positive change to people’s lives. Yet it’s not accomplished by critically picking-at people. It’s accomplished by compassionately picking-up people, lifting their spirits, and raising their vision. And when you and I “learn from Jesus”, we see him doing precisely that. He helps people move from doubt to faith, from oppression to freedom, from fear and cringing to openness and compassion. By telling and showing people about the abundance of Divine Love, Jesus transforms a group of ordinary individuals, into an extraordinary community of faith. And by seeing the “social outcasts” in a completely new light, Jesus helps them to see themselves in that same light - as welcomed and cherished and members of God’s Inclusive and Expansive Family of Faith.

So, what can this teach you and me today as a Family of Faith today? I believe that when you and I are willing to take-on that shared yoke which Jesus offers - to join with him and learn from him - we can joyfully go about our joint-mission of transforming people’s lives! When you and I actually see other people as precious children of God, and openly share with them the Life-changing power of the Divine love and grace that we ourselves have experienced, then we will truly make a difference in this world. Fortunately, this isn’t a heavy burden that we must bear. It’s a wonderful opportunity to relate to one another in ways that make all our burdens lighter, all our joys greater, and each of our

lives far more full and meaningful. This is the Gospel - the Good News of Jesus Christ! And that's our lesson for today. Now let's all try to keep-up with our important homework assignments!