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Today's *gospel* helps us to understand our relationship to those who do not follow the way of love.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, on the other hand, is a powerful witness to how we are to live out the gospel among those who *do* follow the way of love.

Taken together, they provide a guide to how followers of the way relate to others.

How are we to behave when we approach those whom we do not know, who may not be familiar with or even interested in the way?

Jesus tells us that we are to start by offering strangers our peace.

“Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.”

We begin, in other words, by offering them peace, by being honest and humble.

If they respond similarly, then we proceed.

If they do not respond with honesty and humility, on the other hand, if they manipulate, condescend, take advantage, then we simply withdraw and leave them to God.

We do not rage at them in fury, in other words; we merely let our peace return to us.

I have come to you in honesty, love, and respect, but you have not received that or returned it to me, so I withdraw.

“Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you.

Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.”

The kingdom of God is what we enjoy at St. James, a place where people can be themselves, in all their quirkiness, a place where people are respected for and given an opportunity to exercise their various gifts in an atmosphere of honesty and respect, sincerity and compassion.

For those who are not interested in this way of being, we walk away and pray for them.

In fact, Jesus encourages us to pray even for our enemies.

So many people want to pray for Ukraine, but until we pray for Putin and Russia, we have not understood the way of love.

What about when a person of the way goes astray, as we all do at times.

Being a follower of the way, dedicating oneself to love and integrity, is challenging.

All occasionally falter, which is why Paul tells us, “if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”

That is, if any follower of the way is known to have done wrong, then in grace we should try to restore that person to full community.

This does not mean that we overlook the transgression.

There is no restoration in turning a blind eye.

We instead offer confession, that is, taking responsibility for wrongdoing, and joyous absolution.

Thus, when someone transgresses against us, as Jesus explains in Matthew, the person wronged should speak to the person privately.

If that does not work, then speak again with two or three fellow followers of the way present.

If that still does not work, then tell the whole church, and if that person refuses to listen to the whole church, then let him be as a gentile or a tax collector.

In other words, no longer consider him a part of the community.

In my experience, most of the time, such a person leaves of his own accord at that point, if not before, usually in rage because the alternative would require an honest look at oneself.

Christians have a hard time accepting that people may leave the church, but if people refuse to follow the way of humility and love, that is a lot like joining a sports team but refusing to practice between games.

It brings the whole team down.

I have known people who came to church expecting us to make them happy, to heal their psychological illnesses, or to take care of their financial needs.

None of these are the mission of the church.

I have even been told, “You are a priest; you have to be nice and do what I want.”

No.

The gospel is not about being nice.

Was Jesus nice when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers?

Was he nice when he called Herod a fox?

Was he nice when he said,

“You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil?”?

Was Jesus nice when he said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you

cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”?

Did Jesus say to Pilate, “You just need a hug. Bring it in, buddy!”?

It is certainly our earnest desire that everyone enter the way, that everyone be

surrounded with honesty, respect, sincerity, and compassion, but not everyone is at a place where he wants this, so we leave such people to their own devices and move on.

We either follow the way of love (whether we name it so or not), or we do whatever seems to work in the moment.

That might include being “nice,” but such niceness lasts only as long as it is useful.

We may surround ourselves with people who are willing to be polite and honest when it costs nothing, but we recognize the followers of the way when they continue to behave with integrity and compassion even when it is inconvenient.

The job of a follower of the way is not to be nice, but to be honest with oneself and others, humble and compassionate.

It is about building a community of trust in a world that does not value trust.

In the past week, I tried to hire two different people to do work at my house.

They both said they would come on specific days; neither of them called or showed up.

They both threw away my trust.

Trust is precious and it requires work to preserve it.

Paul reminds us that, in order to accomplish this, we are to concern ourselves primarily with our *own* ethics, with our *own* growth.

We are not to point fingers at others, but to look clearly at ourselves.

Now, if we are not to overlook transgressions and are not to point fingers, then what are we to do?

There is a simple rule.

We point out transgressions when we are seeking restoration; we do not point out transgressions merely to make ourselves feel superior.

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As Paul writes, our focus is to be on taking “care that [we ourselves] are not tempted.

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way [we] will fulfill the law of Christ. . . .

All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride.”

“Bear one another's burdens.”

Christianity is about stretching ourselves until we are aware of *other's* needs and of our *own* weaknesses, *about stretching ourselves until we are aware of other's needs and of our own weaknesses*, which is the opposite of what a spiritually immature person does.

An immature person is primarily aware of her own needs and the weaknesses of others.

Maturing means turning that around.

When we succeed, we understand that our achievements are by the grace of God and are not, as Naaman thought, to our own credit.

A follower of the way does not say, “look how great I am,” but “Thank you God for using me in this way.”

People say they do not need the church, in other words, they do not need to be in relationship with other followers of the way to be humble and honest and compassionate.

If it is so easy to do, then why are people of considerable integrity and compassion so rare?

If one wants to learn how to quilt well, one seeks out other quilters.

If one wants to follow the way of integrity and compassion, then one seeks out others who are dedicated to it, who have experience with it, who are not blindly groping their way forward, but have access to resources.

In addition, because we are not isolated individuals but are mutually determining beings, simply being around others who are followers of the way of love helps us in our own paths.

So, as followers of the way, we are to focus on our weaknesses, to focus on others' needs, to seek graciously to restore to community those who have faltered, and to leave to God in prayer those who are not interested.