

## 28C 2022

In today's gospel, people are admiring the beauty of the temple of Jerusalem.

It was an impressive structure, the area of which covered about 36 acres.

The temple building itself is reported to have been 90 feet high and was beautifully adorned with gold and jewels.

Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach, to remind them of what is truly important.

He begins by explaining that the temple, though impressive, is impermanent (and later was, in fact, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, roughly four decades after Jesus' crucifixion).

The one thing that is not impermanent, the one thing that lasts even beyond the death of the body, Jesus teaches us, is relationships.

Jesus is encouraging his followers to build something lasting, something truly meaningful.

I sometimes worry about how people hear Jesus' message.

First, loving others as Jesus encourages us to do, setting relationships as our top priority, does not mean being nice.

Nice is nothing more than social lubricant to keep society operating.

Nice is unrelated to sincerity, to truth.

Nevertheless, when someone encounters a person who is truly herself, someone grounded and sincere and present, he will tend to call her nice, and even to confuse her authenticity with the perfunctory “niceness” of people who know how to smile and to be inoffensive.

These are not the same.

People can nicely cheat you or abuse you and even complain when you do not go along.

Second, putting relationship first does not mean liking a person.

We are not required to like people who do not treat us well, who do not themselves put relationships first.

There are those who are willing to work on having a meaningful relationship, and others who are not, who are lost in concerns about appearances, status, ego.

We need not be their friends, but, as the Cherokee say, “Be tolerant of those who are lost on their path. Ignorance, conceit, anger, jealousy and greed stem from a lost soul.

Pray that they will find guidance.”<sup>1</sup>

Third, putting relationship first does not mean always placing the other person first.

Some people hear “put relationship first” and think, “Love your neighbor as yourself sounds great! That means you have to do what I want!”

Others hear it and think that the saints are the ones who utterly sacrifice themselves and serve only the needs of others.

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1 <https://www.unitedcherokeeanation.net/about/the-code-of-ethics/>

In other words, many people only understand putting themselves first or the other person first.

It is a zero sum game for them.

Christ is encouraging us to put *the relationship* first, and that requires something all together different.

When we put the *relationship* first, we have to be ourselves, honest about how we are feeling, honest about our needs, as well.

Again, the Cherokee say, “Be truthful at all times. Honesty is the test of ones will within this universe.”

When we accept abuse from others, we encourage abuse, and that does not honor God.

What we tolerate, we encourage.

Meaningful relationships are based on mutual respect.

We have had an active, creative, energetic vestry this year.

We have laughed a lot, worked very hard, and sought to improve both life within the church and to improve the connection of the church with the community.

This takes time, of course.

The plans are laid, but we have much to do.

As the election approaches, we have so far three energetic people who are willing to join us, to pick up the tasks from those who deserve a rest.

We are excited to continue this work, but I must tell you, it has not been easy to find people willing to run for vestry because, though the relationships among the vestry members are very positive, and most people have shown gratitude, not all people have treated with respect the members of the vestry, these volunteers who spend so much time serving.

People of faith do not snipe, they do not speak ill behind others backs, they do not criticize, but instead offer solutions, they do not disrespect the intentions of others, they do not assume that they are superior, or that the way it used to be done is the only way to do something.

They do not say, “Why haven’t you done this,” but “I could help with that.”

As the Cherokee say, people of faith “honor other people’s thoughts, wishes and words.”

They “allow each person the right to personal expression.”<sup>2</sup>

The Cherokee also remind us to “never speak of others in a bad way. The negative energy that [we] put out into the universe will multiply when it returns to [us].”

Forgiveness is key.

Again, the Cherokee remind us: “All persons make mistakes. And all mistakes can be forgiven.”

You may wonder why I am quoting the Cherokee.

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2 <https://www.unitedcherokeeanation.net/about/the-code-of-ethics/>

The Native American code of ethics shows that people seeking God all over the world have come to the same basic conclusions.

This is not surprising, since we are all created by love for love, as Julian of Norwich says.

Notice, however, how the disciples completely miss the point.

Rather than saying, “Jesus is right. We need to focus on taking care of one another,” they instead reply, “Say what? When is the temple going to be destroyed????!!”

In other words, they are still more interested in the temple than in Jesus’ point.

Again, he tries to redirect them.

He basically tells them, “Don’t worry about the future. Lots of things are going to happen. People are going to make all sorts of assertions, some even claiming to be me. Just ignore them. There will be all kinds of calamities and wars, but they have nothing to do with the end of the world. You will be persecuted and even put to death for following me. No matter what happens, no matter how bad it gets, do not lose what is most important of all. Do not abandon your relationship with God and with one another. Those who do not abandon me will abide forever.”

Too often, people read Jesus’ words in the same way as his disciples.

Throughout my life, I have heard people say, “It’s the end times! Jesus said there would be wars and rumors of wars, and that is what is happening now!”

In actuality, Jesus is saying the opposite.

“Do not be distracted by the wild claims of others or put off your path by all the violence and abuse on this planet. Value your relationships above all else.”

People tell me that they do not need the church to have meaningful relationships.

As I told you two weeks ago, if that is the case, then why have I not discovered many people who put relationships first, as Christianity insists?

People put them second or third, at best, and it is clear from our behavior what our priority is.

In AA, they assert that people are putting alcohol first, but that is only one of the things that we put before people.

In my experience, for example, most people in the United States these days are more interested in my political beliefs than they are in me.

If I agree with them, they can be my “friend,” but if I do not, they cannot.

True friendship is not based on agreement on anything other than the significance of the friendship.

Please pay attention to the decisions people make, to the decisions you make, and you will see what has first priority.

I do not know anywhere other than the church that provides support for living out the gospel, that makes relationship the top priority.

I believe in the mission of the church.

It is for this reason that I give 10% of my income before taxes to St. James.

As I always say, God gets God's cut before Uncle Sam.

We are in the midst of our pledge drive, so don't forget to turn in your pledge card soon.

You will find them in the narthex.

This makes it possible for us to put together a budget and to plan for the ways that we will support the gospel in the coming year.

Christ is telling his disciples, is telling *us* what is most important, most enduring in the world, the only thing that has any ultimate value.

At St. James, the vestry, David, Darleen, many other lay leaders, and I are building a church that is safe for everyone to be the person God created them to be.

As the Cherokee say, again, do not "allow others to make your path for you. It is your road, and yours alone. Others may walk it with you, but no one can walk it for you."

We are here to walk with others, to support them in their spiritual journey, to strengthen them, but not to determine them.

Each one of you is an important part of that.