

Ascension Year C: 1 / 2 June 2019  
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
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**“We might consider living our life in Christ by sowing seeds of love when confronted with hatred; by offering forgiveness when we are injured; by being the face of comfort when we encounter doubt and despair.”**

Acts 1: 1-11  
Psalm 97  
Ephesians 1: 15-23  
Luke 24: 44-53

If I asked you to write a thesis statement that, in a sentence or two, summarized Jesus' life and message, what would you write? What would you say? What hypothesis would you offer? My wager would be that many of you would most likely paraphrase the essence of the Gold Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In religious circles that becomes: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk. 10.27) You can find iterations of this in each of the Synoptic Gospels phrased according to the author's intention.

Regardless of whichever way you parse it, the bases of the Gold Rule is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. This message seems so simple – love God, love your neighbor, love yourself – and most of us agree with it to the point it rolls off our tongues easily, and yet, over the centuries, we've managed to complicate Jesus to the point of replicating the very concerns he challenged during his life-time with his message of radical, unfettered hospitality. Pharisaical authority and rule based legalese dominates much of the conversation in the Christian household today. Who's in and who's out; who lives by the rules and who does not. Comparatively, for Jesus, acceptance of the *other* regardless of societal or religious persuasion, was essential. The care we provide for one another is emblematic of God's reign; of God's desire as expressed within the triune Godhead – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. The tragedy of

our complicating Jesus is the institution's insistence on worship of Jesus rather than emulating him by embodying his message in our daily practice of living life. We have, I dare say, confused the messenger with the message; worship with mission.

There is a saying attributed to the Buddhist community that admonishes one not to confuse the finger for the moon. What this saying imparts is that in the many followers of Buddha some began to worship him at the expense of his teaching that pointed his followers towards freeing themselves from suffering through meditation. In other words, if someone asked me where is the moon, I would naturally point toward that white globe in the night sky. However, the questioner might put their focus solely on my finger, which is doing the pointing, and not on the orb that I am pointing towards. Jesus points us towards a life in God through radical hospitality and abundant gratitude towards others while asking nothing for one's self. Jesus draws our attention towards service (missional) more so than worship (maintenance).

Now worship is not a bad thing in and of itself. . . except when it is. The word worship is simply a compound word signifying something of worth or value, an acknowledgment of worthiness or praise. In the Christian/religious sense that means praise of God. In that context, Jesus, as the Logos Incarnate, is worthy of praise. However, such worship becomes a negative effect when it centers solely on ritual and all its accouterments; when worship allows us to stare at our doors waiting to see who is coming in to join us rather than us go out through them into the community giving witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus, then it is negative. We, like the early disciples, can contemplate the heavens or stare at our navels in worshipful wonderment, or we can be missional in serving the other. Instead of paying homage to Christ, we are, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "to put on Christ." (Romans 13.14) Thus, Jesus points us towards life in God.

At its heart, that is what the feast of the Ascension entails. Jesus' ascent is one into the very heart of God by which we are thus sacramentally drawn into through the Eucharist. Jesus draws us into the Life of God through table fellowship. As the Word Incarnate, Jesus' ascension draws us into the relational expression of selfless love that is God personified symbolically as the Trinity. When we take part in the Eucharist, we too are drawn into that internal expression of selfless love and transformed into living members of Christ's Body. Dare I risk saying, by

participating in communion we experience the ascension where we are taken into co-union with the Sacred. Therefore, we come to this table not only for strength, but also for solace, not only for pardon but also for renewal. How do we then live into being the Body of Christ? If Jesus is worthy of praise as God's anointed, if his message is to love God and to love others, how then do we live this truth in our daily lives?

Earlier, I deliberately asked what hypothesis you would use to summarize Jesus' message and life. I did so knowing that the root for hypothesis is the same for the word hypostasis, a more psychological/ theological category. The word *hypo* means under, as in the underlying reality/belief/premise. This underlying reality is the bases of the hypostatic union used to describe the Godhead, the underlying substance of which is love. God abides in love as Love; which the pleroma, the fullness thereof, dwells in Christ incarnated in Jesus. Through the ascension, Jesus as Christ, lifts us into this internal dialogue of Love. It is a transformative experience that we participate in sacramentally when we partake of bread and wine consecrated into the body and blood of Christ. The ascension reminds us of this underlying reality, where through the Eucharist we ascend into the inner life of God whereby we are transformed into instruments of grace who abide in Divine Love and from which we go forth in Love for all creation. In other words, the Golden Rule embodied in the living of our lives in Christ. So how do we do that? We might consider living our life in Christ by sowing seeds of love when confronted with hatred; by offering forgiveness when we are injured; by being the face of comfort when we encounter doubt and despair. We can be the Body of Christ by consoling the downtrodden; when we try to understand other's plight rather than judge them; or simply love the other just as they are and not as we wish them to be. If these words sound familiar, it is because they come from the Prayer of St. Frances, which offers us a beautiful template on how to live life when we put on Christ and follow Jesus as he draws us into the inner life of God. Let us go forth this day as instruments of such grace and peace.

