

WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

The Pastor's Portion *Spiritual Nourishment for the Soul*

February 17, 2020

In this installment of the Essential Teachings of Jesus, we look at how our egoic self has tricked us into the misguided and spiritually deficient notion that we are better or more important than others. This ego leads us into separation from our fellow human beings, and from a loving God that wants us to understand that we are all connected by God's love.

This belief that we are separate from God leads to all kinds of hatred and division, the kind that we see on full and ugly display today in the world, and in our nation.

It is imperative, in fact urgent- that we work to recognize, confront and eliminate this false notion of separation, or we will all perish.

I agree with your dreams for our church family and pray for them daily. This is the dream that God has placed in me: That the church become a place with wide open doors to all who want to experience the love of God, and that we may be salt and light in such a way as to heal our communities and world. This is how I think we can make a difference together. Will you pray with me so that we can bring our dreams to fruition?



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Beginning on February 26, 2020: THE ALMIGHTY JOURNEY OF FAITH:

40 DAYS OF PRAYER, MEDITATION AND HEALTHY EATING

10:45-11:00AM Devotion and meditation in Sanctuary

1:00 pm COFFEE & CONVERSATION WITH PASTOR KRIS



Image above created for West Center Church by Jeremy Tressler. Please thank him for the gift of his talent to help West Center reach out to the community.



West Center Church seeks to worship the Living God, being Led by the Holy Spirit to carry on the work of Jesus in justice, peace simplicity and unity.

Weekly Inspiration: The EGO

Excerpts from Richard Rohr:

“The ego is that part of the self that wants to be significant, central, and important by itself, apart from anybody else. It wants to be both separate and superior. It is defended and self-protective by its very nature.... The ego is what Jesus called an “actor,” usually translated from the Greek as “hypocrite” (see Matthew 23”

.....
“The ego makes life all about achievement and attainment. As long as your egoic self acts as your primary guide, religion becomes a worthiness contest in which everybody loses or gives up. Many, if not most people, never even try the spiritual journey when they see that they can't live up to today's culturally created performance principles.”
.....

“Life and God ask us to let go of our false self—the passing, egoic identity we’ve manufactured in order to cope and survive. To be freed from self-preoccupation, we must be centered in the Real, our inherent and unbreakable identity as God’s beloved. Once we’re connected to our Source, we know that our isolated, seemingly inferior or superior individual self is not that big a deal. The more we cling to self-importance and ego, the more we are undoubtedly living outside of union.

The Essential Teachings Part 3

Matthew 5:21-37 The Message (MSG) Bible

21-22 “You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. **The simple moral fact is that words kill.**

23-24 “This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. **If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.**

25-26 “Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine.²⁷⁻²⁸ “You know the next commandment pretty well, too: ‘Don’t go to bed with another’s spouse.’ But don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your *heart* can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your *body*. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.²⁹⁻³⁰ **Let’s not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here’s what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.**³¹⁻³²

“Remember the Scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights’? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’ Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure.³³⁻³⁷ **And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.**

Last Sunday I had a conversation with one of our members, and it was very enlightening. It confirmed the realization that is constantly in my awareness that being a Christian, a true disciple of Jesus, is really hard, it not nearly impossible. So, before I get into my sermon, I want to pose a question to you, and I want you to write down the answer on the paper the deacons are giving you.

What is it that keeps you from worshiping God in spirit and in truth? What in your life is blocking you from thinking about God, focusing on your spiritual development, going deeper into the heart of God? This question and the answer to it is at the heart of the message from God on today. What is it? Is it anger, is it politics, is it the news, is it poverty, or wealth, is it resentment, or lack of energy? Is it loneliness? Is it ego? What is it? Write it down. The deacons will collect it. You don’t have to put your name on it. Just write it down. Yes, right now...and what we are going to do is put it all on the altar and pray over it, and once we pray, we are going to take these papers out into the street and burn them. Because, we must be rid of these things if we want to be an authentic community of faith. We must singularly focus our attention on God. I don’t want you to pluck out your eye, or cut off your hand, but I do want you to begin to emotionally separate yourselves from that which prevents you from the true worship of and service to God. This is not a one-shot deal though. We will need to do this repeatedly in order to

practice being all we are called to be. Today we are going to find out for real that following Jesus is not easy!

In this sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon ever preached, Jesus is giving instructions to US as to how we are to be, behave, think, feel and conduct ourselves as his disciples. And, if truth be told, it is a VERY tall order. So first he blesses us, calls us blessed if we are at the end of our ropes because then we can experience more of God dependence than self-dependence, then he tells us that because we are blessed, we are now to be salt and light—seasoning, irritants and illumination to the world. And in this next-- what we call periscope...passage of scripture, we are now being instructed on how we are to be in relationship with one another. And it is not easy stuff to actually live out.

Now in this sermon, I will not really focus on the adultery part. That part of the sermon actually does something really radical, which is to preach against the objectification of women, and anyone who is viewed as “the other”. See it is easy to discriminate, to treat poorly, to shun and to punish people who are not like us as long as we can objectify and see people other than ourselves as less than human. And this was the norm then, and it is still the norm in our society. That really is why you can see racism and misogyny and hatred of immigrants and people of African descent, and women and same gender loving people thriving in our society today. This is a sermon in and of itself and if I started to go down this rabbit hole, I will never come out.

But what I want to focus on is two aspects of this Sermon: The Essential teachings.
First: Anger: David Capps says:

"Anger is one of the stronger emotions used by the ego. Anger feeds emotional-based energy to the ego and produces nothing usable by the spirit. The spirit within cannot grow or function in an environment of anger. Through anger, the ego becomes stronger and more firmly in control of our life. This is one of the choices we face when we embark on our spiritual journey: we must choose love over anger; we cannot have both. By allowing anger into our life, we lock our self out of the Kingdom of Heaven and condemn ourselves to the tyranny of an out-of-control ego."

Let me give you an example: In my last assignment at Safe Haven, there was a woman who really could not stand me. It all happened very innocently. I was teaching her niece who is a lay minister at the church. And I was doing some bible study and theological training for her and another lay minister. So, I asked her to purchase a NRSV study bible..one that is commonly used in seminaries. She balked that the bible, which cost about \$30 was too expensive. I was going to give her one of mine, but in my opinion if you are called to be a minister, lay or otherwise, it is on you to equip yourself so that you can properly and in an informed way minister to the people.

Later that week, I was on Facebook and saw that she had purchased tickets to a Beyonce concert. The tickets were \$200.00 a pop! So when I next saw her, I said to her that I noticed she had no financial problems getting Beyonce tickets but could not afford a \$30.00 bible. She was INFURIATED. And her response to having been called out for her lack of commitment, her priorities, etc---her reaction was to STOP coming to church! Her anger at me was blocking her from her relationship with God, her commitment to her ministry, her commitment to the church, her obligations as a lay minister called by the church to take care of the people and her ability to hear the preached word. Not from me, but from any of the ministers at Safe Haven, and at that time there were a variety of voices who preached on any given Sunday.

This is the thing about anger: It is like taking a poison pill and expecting the other person to die. She thought she was punishing me, and in fact she was damaging her own reputation, harming her own relationship with God, preventing herself from hearing the preached word of God, blocking her ability to learn more from those more knowledgeable about the bible and theology than herself, and keeping herself from being in close fellowship with the faith community...which of course is what God calls us to do—be in relationship with one another. And I guess she was looking to me to apologize, so she gets mad, she stops coming to church as I guess a sign to the community that she did not approve of me...and she misses out. Because, I did not stop going to church, I did not stop learning, I did not stop ministering, I kept going deeper into the heart of God and ministering to those who were there to hear my voice. Those who could benefit from my perspective on the gospel.

The moral of that story is that if you get angry: don't cut your nose off to spite your face. Don't harm your own self off from fellowship with the saints because you are angry with one person. That is nothing but EGO and the desire to be right, and it is taking a poison pill, expecting the person with whom you are angry to die.

Now, there are some conditions where a demonstration of anger is appropriate. There is a difference between living in anger and a demonstration of anger. When Jesus chased the moneychangers out of the temple, this was a demonstration of anger. Jesus is not allowing the anger itself to become part of Him or His consciousness, but He is using it for the effect it has on other people. Jesus does not hold on to the anger. It is just a demonstration, a performance, which is put on to create an end result.

Then Jesus talks about those things that keep us from the pure worship of God and fellowship with each other. If your eye offends you or if your arm offends you pluck it out or cut it off....

Yes, we must admit that we will get angry, our egos will go before us and lead us in directions that are not of God, and that we will take offense and offend others. This is the human condition!

But let's talk about reconciliation! Jesus is very clear as to how we are to handle this disagreement between the people of God. Can you imagine coming to church and the first thing you do, if you know you have offended or another has offended you, to walk up to them, have an honest dialogue about it, look them in the eyes and see their humanity, their pain...see them as God sees them? What a different life we would have, and what a different community we would be. Instead of talking behind each other's backs, instead of gossiping and back biting, or avoiding hearing the word preached, how about making a genuine effort to be with people and actually live in authentic and loving community. Is that too much to ask?

Reconciliation to each other and to God is the point of Jesus' teachings! Jesus had a determined focus not so much on the ritual and ethical obligation, but on the value, and high value of reconciled interpersonal relationships.

And this brings me to a very important point about our faith! This is the deal...Christianity..true Christianity and the ethic of Jesus is less concerned and focused on your own personal piety..are you a good person, did you do the proper and polite thing, were you sugary sweet and ethically right in your own eyes..did you dot your I's and cross your T's. That is not what this walk is about. Our MANDATE as followers of Jesus is really two-fold.

First, the highest spiritual principal that we slay the dragon of our EGO first. You know, that ego that tells you that you are separate from others, that you are better than others, that buys into

the world view of money over God, possessions over peace, wealth over wisdom knowledge and understanding, chackis over charity.

As long as we hold any other person in lower esteem than we hold ourselves, or anyone else, we have blocked the Kingdom of Heaven from our lives. We cannot fully enter into the Kingdom of Heaven as long as we hold anyone as being separate from us or from God. The Kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom of oneness; there is no place for separation

This ego also sees ourselves as separate from God. Jesus' teachings are subversive because he is telling us in no uncertain, (but not necessarily obvious) terms that we are NOT to view others as separate from ourselves, irrespective of our station in life, the color of our skin, the religion that we practice, the place that we live, the car that we drive, the person we are married to or who we love, or any one of the other false constructs people use to distinguish themselves from others. When we do this, we are separating ourselves from God. And note that oneness does not mean sameness. We are not all the same, but we must strive to recognize our oneness.

And second, our MANDATE as his followers is to care for those who have less, are poor, needy, widowed, orphaned, lost, lonely and left out. That we MUST do. Period, Full stop.

So, when we call each other fools, or call names at each other and judge each other to within an inch of our lives, seeing one another as other or separate, we are missing the point, that we are all one.

Notice that when Jesus instructs us to be reconciled to thy brother before presenting ourselves to God, he is telling us to observe a practice that is a very important aspect of spiritual growth. **When we are grown up spiritually there will be a fundamental shift in our thinking, feelings and actions. We will no longer function from the position of conflict, challenge and judgment. We will operate from the position of understanding, compassion, gentleness and kindness. Only then can we feel and experience the sunlight of the Spirit.**

Only by removing every last remnant of the conflict are we free from its effects. Until then we are held captive by our own thoughts and feelings related to the conflict. We are imprisoned by our own resentment and bitterness and will not be set free until all of it is resolved.

So on this day: I want to urge you to dispense with the notion that your faith depends on you being or appearing to be all holy and self-righteous, and what you think may be a version of Christianity that is polite and sweet and nice, and go to the heart of this faith....The heart of the faith is the persistent diminution of the ego which separates you from your fellow human beings and from God, and the heart of the faith requires that you care for the needy, the hungry, the poor, the lost, the addict, the homeless, the prisoner, the widow and the orphan. This is the work that will set you apart and make you holy.

West Center Congregational Monthly Church Calendar

February African-American History Month
AA Heritage Moments during Service **Commemorating 400 + Years of Africans in America: 1619-2019**

26 Pastor Kris available to pray, impose ashes and give counseling 11::05-2pm Lenten Almighty Journey of Faith begins.

28 Rev. Kris Training a group of Climate Activists in the Lounge 9am-5p through (not open to the public)

29

March **WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH**

1 **COMMUNION SUNDAY**

8 Daylight Savings Begins

13-14 Rev. Kris to train a church in Rochester in Racial Reconciliation

15 **Deacons Meeting**

19: **Town Hall with Mike Khader 6:30-7:45PM**

27: **Salon Style Potluck Meal, Music and Musings with Friends of Jeremy**