

Community Church of Issaquah
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Doing the Hard Work of Christ

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I have never understood why, but as a student, the only course that was easy for me was English. It was never clear to me why I could breeze through those classes without even opening the book most of the time, but math, chemistry, biology. That's a whole other story. Literature was a part of the study of English that was the most fascinating to me. Perhaps it helped that I grew up in the South with some very famous authors all around me. I recall as a paperboy of 11 or 12 years old riding my bike as I delivered the Jackson, Mississippi Clarion Ledger newspaper each morning. Many days as I rode down Capitol Street, I would see an older woman sitting on her porch waiting for me. Her name was Eudora Welty. It took me quite a while before I knew that she was a well-known writer. Later when I read her book "Delta Wedding," it dawned on me that she was the one who waved or spoke to me each time I delivered her paper. You've probably never heard of her, but she remains one of the most admired writers in the South.

There are other writers that I came to love and appreciate as I continued my education and my passion for English Literature. Authors like Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote. Margaret Mitchell and my favorite, Carson McCullers. Her book, "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," is one I have read more than a dozen times. And then there is Harper Lee, a native of Monroeville, Alabama. She only wrote one book, but that one book remains a classic. Maybe you know it. "To Kill a Mockingbird." It's the story of a lawyer who defends a Black man who was falsely accused of talking to a White

young woman – a forbidden law in Alabama. Sadly, he was convicted by an all-white jury. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why the current governor of Alabama, Kay Ivy, has banned that book from public school libraries in that state – among many others.

So it shouldn't surprise you that I am also intrigued and passionate about those who wrote the books of the Bible. Though we know little about who, when and why the 66 books of the Scriptures were written, I cannot help myself from digging into what is known about these men. Today's Bible passage is from the book of Matthew. He has always been my favorite writer of Scripture because his writings concentrate primarily on the teachings of Christ as well as the ministry that Jesus had to the people of Israel during his three years of work.

Matthew has an interesting story. As a Jew, his name was actually Levi, and he was known to be one of the sons of a Jewish leader named Alphaeus. If you read the accounts in Mark and Luke of Matthew's conversion to Christianity, you would not see him called Matthew in either of those accounts, only Levi. The name "Levi" means "joined," which must have had a significant meaning to his family. Ironically though, Matthew writes a good bit about the work of Christ even before he tells his own story of his calling to be a disciple. That only appears in his Gospel in the ninth chapter. It was Jesus who gave him the name Matthew, meaning a "gift of Yahweh" after he was called to follow Jesus.

Holding one of the most despised professions within the Jew world at the time, Matthew or Levi was a tax collector, making a substantial living but deeply despised by his own Jewish neighbors. Even in the Old Testament, tax collectors were treated with great disgust and

disdain. So the story of his encounter with Jesus makes the story so much more important to us as we focus on his writings. Matthew and Jesus were living in Capernaum, a city in Galilee. It's likely that Matthew had not only heard of but had also seen Jesus before his personal encounter. If we think about Matthew as tax collector and why he was originally so despised, keep in mind that as a tax collector, fishermen like Peter and James would have to pay him money for their boat and for the fish they caught and perhaps sold. If Jesus had continued the work and tradition of his step-father, Joseph, he would also have paid taxes on his carpentry work. No one ever escaped this Roman law that everyone hated so much.

So, there sat Matthew at his tax collector table one day when who came by? Jesus. In the ninth chapter of his Gospel, Matthew shares his personal story. It goes like this: Jesus went up to him and simply said, "Follow me" and Matthew got up, left his post, and did what Jesus asked. Then an interesting thing happened. Matthew invited Jesus to come to his house and be a part of a big dinner party with other tax collectors and, as Matthew says, "sinners." You can read this story in the ninth chapter of Matthew and you will see what happened. In that passage, you'll also find one of the most profound statements I believe Christ ever made. To the Pharisees he said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."

And Matthew began his ministry to the sick. We know that his young adult man probably in his 30's began his work as a preacher of the new Gospel. Though his ministry is not mentioned much after Matthew witnessed Christ's ascent into heaven at what we call Pentecost. Yet Bible historians tell us that he spent the remainder of this life ministering to the sick and preaching the Gospel or good news to the people in

Ethiopia. Keep in mind that Ethiopia at that time was another Arabic country, not a Black nation as it is now. The estimate is that Matthew died in the year 34 A.D. though the cause of his death is not certain, but it is believed he was killed by swordsmen of the king as he was at the altar in prayer.

So, why does all this life history of Matthew matter? Simply because those of us here need to see the intent and the content of his Gospel. Written in Aramaic, not Hebrew or Greek like many of the other New Testament Scriptures, it focuses entirely on recounting the teachings and the later life of Jesus. It is a broad and beautiful reminder of what Jesus did and what Jesus wants us to do. And as you already know, following Christ can be difficult at times.

That raises the question, “What is the work of Christ?” In this morning’s Scripture reading, Matthew sums it up this way. First, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Second, “Do not practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.” Certainly, that is not the only admonishing that Christ gives to his followers but truly powerful words for all believers. Read Matthew’s entire Gospel and you’ll have a list of teachings a mile long that Christ asks of believers. It is simply that these two requests are among the most difficult for all believers to follow.

Has it ever been easy for any of us to love our enemy? Don’t answer that, it’s rhetorical. We know the answer. So did Matthew. The difficult part of loving our enemies is that we don’t always know how to identify who our enemy is. Who is it that bullies us or pressures up or annoys us or drives us nuts? Could it be someone like my neighbors who play their music so loud that the walls vibrate or the woman I hear

using the most fowl language and names when she yells at her two-year-old or the politicians who spend enormous amounts of time criticizing anyone who isn't in total agreement with them? Is it the one who demeans someone who has made a mistake? Each of us would find it easy to make a list, whether long or short, of our enemies or people whom we find it impossible to love.

Matthew's remembrance of Jesus's asking, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?" highlights very clearly the complexity of our trying our hardest to love those whom we put on our list of most despised. It is very hard work to do what Christ asks of us – love your enemies. Pray for those who are so difficult and seek God's guidance to strengthen you as you work hard to do as Jesus said, "be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Aim for perfection. First, however, you must identify your enemy. Is it political? Someone in your social world? Could it be someone in your family? Once you decide who, the hard work begins to love them. Get ready. It's a hard road ahead.

When I was in college studying religion, the daughter of one of my professors, who was also a student there, and I became good friends. We are still friends more than 50 years after our college days. We each would encourage the other to write something profound for the college's collection of writings that was printed each year. Sadly, mine never got there, but hers did several times. One of those written works has been a mantra for me since I read it the first time. It goes like this:

*When all of life is read to me
And all the world its judgement sees,
The things that meant the most to God
Were done in secret, not in mobs.*

That's the second request Christ gives us as we are doing his hard work. We're instructed not to practice our righteousness in front of others. In other words, whatever you do for Christ does not have to be recognized or awarded praise. Few of us want to work hard and never be rewarded for it. I was reminded of the Adopted Family project this past Christmas. I had wondered where the thank you letter was and when the family would sing the praises of CCI for what we had done. Then writing this message for today, I remembered that Christ said "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets." We are called to do God's work in secret knowing that the reward for us will come from the Father who has seen what we have done and reward us in secret. We don't need a thank you letter. We just need to keep doing Christ's work to receive His thank you.

There are few things harder for any of us than to go about doing silent work without wanting to have some accolade or praise. It's difficult to wrap our minds around the direction Christ has given to us about doing this hard work. This all begins with our need to listen to what Christ has said to us. Were you aware that "listen" and "silent" are both spelled with the same letters? When we pause to listen to the words and calling of Christ to love someone or to do for someone, then we should do that in silence without seeking any recognition.

These two strong instructions from Christ about doing his hard work are the core of what Matthew shared Our Savior had said. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." Michael Adam Beck put it this way, "*The church should be a place where wounded people can come and be made well again, not with flashy miracles, but by finding a safe place where they can unbandage and bare their wounds in a community of love and forgiveness.*" That is a simple truth: the church is not a

showplace for saints, but a hospital for the wounded. The work of this church and of every member and friend is to quietly do the hard work that Christ told us to do. Love our enemies. Do God's work quietly. It is never easy, but it has its rewards in heaven – recognition from the Lord with the hope that in the end, we will hear the words of God saying, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” Now the question is this: Are we ready to get busy doing the hard work?