

SLD11.03.06 Loving Relationships and All Saints Day
EPC
Mark 12:28-34
Jill Oglesby Evans

“How Great A Cloud of Loving Relationships”

Given the special elements of today’s service celebrating All Saints, stewardship, communion and the reception of a new member, you might be relieved to know that I intend to keep this sermon mercifully brief. Which shouldn’t be too difficult given that what we’re really celebrating today is loving relationships in the church, the eighth and final quality characteristic of Natural Church Development. Natural Church Development is that body of wisdom we’ve been exploring here of late in a sermon series about what it takes to be a healthy, flourishing church. And the way I see it, everything we’re up to in worship today is about loving relationships.

Which is a good thing since, in today’s text, Jesus doesn’t say “*talk* about love;” he says “love!” sure enough. “Love God and love neighbor,” says Jesus. “There are no commandments greater than these.” So rather than just listening to me talk about love this morning, pay attention to what you see and hear and experience. Because this whole service is about loving relationships, which, incidentally, is something this church does pretty well.

In fact, of the eight characteristics of healthy, flourishing churches (which are listed in your bulletin), it was Loving Relationships that this church slammed as its numero uno, primo, gold-medal maximum factor. Which is really good news because according to the guru of Natural Church Development, Christian Schwarz, there is a highly significant relationship between the ability of

a church to demonstrate love and its long-term growth potential.¹ In fact, Schwarz goes so far as to say that “Authentic love endows a church with a much greater magnetic power than all the marketing efforts in the world!”²

I’d say that makes the future of this church a pretty good investment.

In case you’re wondering how the NCD folks measure loving relationships in a church, or if you’re wondering how to raise our love-quotient even higher, they ask questions like:

- How much time do members spend with one another outside of official church-sponsored events, like for meals or coffee? and,
- How generous is the church in doling out compliments?
- How much laughter is there in the church? and,
- To what extent is the pastor aware of the personal problems of the lay workers in the congregation?

You can see why you rated yourselves pretty high, can’t you?

This week I received a timely letter offering a tangible example of the affection with which this community is often regarded. Long-time member and elder Jong, recently moved to Dubai, wrote these words for me to share with you. He says, “My thanks to God and appreciation to all EPC families are overflowing in my heart. I pray every morning to God for you...my sweet memories with you help me live in comfort and happiness here. ...Your prayer, love, and kindness are gold of my heart. Love in Christ, Jong.” Enclosed in Jong’s letter from the

¹ Natural Church Development, Christian Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, St. Charles, Il., 2006. p. 38.

² Color Your World with Natural Church Development, Christian Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, St. Charles, Il., 2005, p. 120.

United Arab Emirates was a contribution, for our church, for our Stephen's Pantry, and for these beautiful flowers to enhance our worship today.

Of course, Jong isn't the only one who regards this church as "gold of the heart." Take a closer look at the "art work" displayed on the back wall of the sanctuary from last week's Wednesday Night supper and you'll notice a lot of hearts and stick figures holding hands. When people shyly explained their simple drawings, we heard words like "love, support, affection, acceptance, a sense of belonging, community, fellowship, friends, warmth, nurturance."

One person summed it up well saying, "I experience love here and find myself better able to love because of it." This is how we humans are wired. It is also the purpose of the church. God loved us into existence, and the Body of Christ, the church, is meant to teach us how to love God and one another back. Anyone who understands and lives into this truth, well, Jesus says that one is not far from the Kingdom of God.

'Course, the development of long-term cliques with definitive relationships does not a loving church make. It's how welcome we make newcomers feel, how warmly we include newer members, how long it takes anybody to feel like they belong here. But we're working on all that, right? Which, it seems to me, makes the "present" of this church, what we're up to these days, a pretty good investment.

But in case you imagine loving relationships are something new in this community, we purposefully took time today, lots of time, to name not only our members and friends who died this year, but many of the ones who died in years

past, ones whose lives and faith and commitment to this church are remembered with special reverence and affection.

Such a long list, wasn't it, but by no mean a complete one. No doubt many of you, upon the hearing of these names, recalled others that should have been on the list. But the point is not to produce a comprehensive list of the saints of the church so much as to engage us all a process of re-membering; literally of claiming again as members the ones in this church who came and went before us, modeling and guiding and inspiring us in our own discipleship. These souls, though they have joined the triumphant host, are yet members of this particular Body of Christ. They are *ours*, for it is *their* shoulders on which we all stand.

For me this experience of honoring and re-membering past members yields both an assertion and a question. The assertion regards the far-reaching sweep of loving relationships in this church, the scope of affection and community over the years, the length and breadth and depth of commitment, not just today, but as far back as memory can reach.

The question raised by the remembrance of the "great ones" of our past, the strong and steady solons who raised us or befriended us or modeled for us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a pillar of the church, is...how will **we** be remembered? How will our children and our children's children and all the other future members of Emory Church remember us twenty, thirty, fifty years from now? In the year 2056, will Lee be telling stories here at Emory Church about this fine old man he used to know named Stewart, who really sought Christ with his heart? As an adult, will Anna Katherine tear up when she remembers

the fun she had in Worship Readiness thanks to the creative efforts of Julianne and Debbie and Glenna and Liz? Or, will there even be an Emory Presbyterian Church then in which to remember the saints of today?

Don't you see? What we have and who we are today is the gift to us of every person we took the time to name. Both figuratively and literally, the very existence of this church is their legacy to us. In fact, since we continually operate with a deficit budget, predicted, if nothing changes, to grow next year to a whopping \$80,000, which, when it doesn't drive me crazy, makes me weep, we could even say we're still living off our inheritance. We're still spending our folks' money. You and I still haven't quite figured out how to stand on our own, never mind what we're going to leave future generations.

But, I figure, God gives us all the time we need to grow up. To realize what we've got, and recognize its value. To treasure the gifts of our heritage and risk investing in God's future the way our forebearers did. And, like all children of God, we're not alone in the enterprise. All those folks we named this morning? They're all rooting for us. And not just the beloved members of our past, but the anticipated members of our future, too, starting today with James.

God's got a future in mind for this church; I can feel it in my bones, can't you? And friends, *I* say...it's worth investing in.

To the glory of God. Amen.