

All of us were children however long ago. Some of that child's wisdom is still with us today. We learned back then that, no matter how hard you try,

- No matter how hard you try, you can't baptize cats.
- When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair.
- If your sister hits you, don't hit her back. They always catch the second person
- Never ask your 3-year old brother to hold a tomato.
- You can't trust dogs to watch your food.
- Puppies still have bad breath even after eating a tic tac.
- Never hold a dustbuster and a cat at the same time.
- School lunches stick to the wall.
- You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.
- Don't wear polka-dot underwear under white shorts.

In a way, we are still children. We are God's children, God's beloved with whom God is well pleased because God has adopted and calls us his sons and daughters.

Matthew 3...when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

As with Jesus, so with us: We are God's beloved child.

When we forget our identity as God's beloved children with whom God is well-pleased, and get wound up in anger, anxiety, fear, and resentment, we hurt each other without meaning to. Nobody likes to be hurt, discounted or ignored. No surprise here: we don't like to feel bad! And sometimes, bad feelings make us avoid one another. We begin to rehearse the hurt in our minds, and build a case against each other, pouring ourselves into our own hurt and resentment. Then, we go tell someone else about it, and the story takes on yet another dimension.

There is another way.

## Acts 10

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; ... he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

If someone has hurt or rebuffed us, **they** need to be able to say “I’m sorry”. They can’t do that if we don’t tell them why we are upset.

“We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent.”<sup>1</sup>

The ways in which I have been hurt and have hurt others are different from the ways you have been hurt and have hurt others. But we are connected by this brokenness. What holds us together and strengthens us in this congregation? Our strong bonds of love don’t come from our perfection or from how nice we try to be. They come from forgiveness. When we forgive one another, we give each other the gift of renewed friendship, deeper trust, and the freedom speak the truth in love. We can relax and know that no matter what happens or how we feel, we are important, valued, and loved.

God is with us when things are hard. God is with us to support us in each daring act of going back to the hand that bit us to tell him or her that we have been hurt! We can rightly ask ourselves: Why would anyone do that? Why would we are risk being bitten again? Because if we avoid each other, we deprive ourselves of the experience of beginning again, of letting go of our resentment, and of letting the tension of Having to avoid one another melt in forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson, Spiegel and Grau, 2015 paperback p. 289

Forgiveness, not niceness or perfection, is the glue that binds us to one another in love. When we avoid one another and tell our story of hurt to anyone **but** the person who needs to hear it so they can say “I’m sorry”, we are slowly tearing the fabric of our own community apart.

Pretend Isaiah was written to you, personally. Hear him as he speaks to you. Listen for how God’s spirit in you gives you power beyond your wildest imagination: power for healing, power for mercy, power for trust, and power for truth. Whether or not you can feel it, you have received this power from God as a gift to be used by you to give joy to the person who needs it.

Isaiah 42

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him...

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as ...

a light to the nations,

to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

God has taken us by the hand and put his spirit upon us and given us the power to lighten someone’s darkness with mercy and understanding.

Over the course of these past few years each of us has experienced the upheaval of change. Some of the changes we have chosen. Some of the changes we had no control over. Change is hard. Growing together in love is hard. When we face such challenges together, it helps me to remember my identity as a beloved child of God at all times and in all places, and especially, with all people—that every conversation is a holy conversation because God is in our midst.

“Almighty God, you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them.”

--Prayer of St. Chrysostom

When I answered God’s call to come love the people of St Matthew’s and to seek to follow Jesus together with you, I felt sorrow and I felt joy. There was sorrow in saying goodbye to friends, neighbors and colleagues, and joy in saying hello to you. Now, after a year and a third, we are getting to know one another better. That takes time.

What I love most about this parish is your openness, prayerfulness, and your desire to reach out to others who need your friendship and your listening ear. I love that you deeply value and nurture your relationships with one another and with God. I love that you desire to make friends with those who are not yet part of St. Matthew’s, sharing with them what you love most about being a follower of Jesus. I love your hunger and eagerness for meaningful and holy worship, whether in silence or song. I love the sense that when we come together for fun, study, service, or worship, the Holy Spirit is in our midst. I love your generosity.

As we walk as children of the light this Epiphany season, let us remember to shine that light on everyone we meet, even if they don’t deserve it. You and I are God’s beloved, held together by our fragility, vulnerability, and need for God’s grace and mercy. Each of us has received the power to shower each other with God’s grace and mercy. It helps to remember that God chose you. God chose you as his beloved child, and I have chosen you as the people with whom I can laugh, cry, play and pray with. When God called me to love the lord with all my heart and soul, mind, and body, and my neighbor as myself, he gave me you.