

Different Choices
Sunday, May 22, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

“I give you a new commandment: Love one another. And you’re to love one another the way I have loved you.”

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Most Saturday mornings, a group of us gathers on the lawn for drum circle with Brother [Gerald C. Rivers](#). And if you are someone who struggles with making mistakes, I highly recommended it.

You see, when you do something that you wish you hadn’t, brother Gerald doesn’t call it a “mistake” ... he says “there are no mistakes, there are only ... different choices.”

And ... the key is what he always says next. That when we make one of those choices that ends up being not what we wanted to do, the only appropriate response is to laugh ... and then to learn.

Now he says this because laughing is usually not our response to mistakes ... or different choices.

Many of us have been shaped to believe that our mistakes make us disappointing ... or incompetent ... or even bad people. And so, often we build in this pre-emptive strike against ourselves before others can do it to us. “UGH! I’m so stupid! I can’t do this!” ... saying it to ourselves before someone else can say it to us ... or maybe echoing voices from the past that are so ingrained they are indistinguishable from our own.

But when we laugh at our mistakes ... or “different choices” ... the laughter opens us up not only to forgiving ourselves, to loving ourselves ... but to learning ... and growing.

I was thinking about this last fall when a friend of mine asked me to be on his podcast and talk about my biggest leadership mistakes. And I want to share them with you this morning ... because they happened right here.

And ... I want to share them because I think there are lessons here not just for me but for all of us. And how we live that new commandment that Jesus gives us this morning.

So, let's rewind back to 2016. I was fresh off the plane from St. Louis. New rector of All Saints Church. And I was nervous. Probably terrified was more like it. And I was trying to pretend I wasn't.

This is a big job. Not only is All Saints known around the Episcopal Church ... this place is like five times the size of my last congregation. I knew this was a stretch. And I so wanted to make you all believe you hadn't made a mistake in calling me. I wanted to fulfill your expectations. And

what I understood those expectations to be was that you wanted me to lead you out of the pews and into the streets. You actually used that language. To take the work we had done in St. Louis and Ferguson and bring it here to Pasadena.

And when Donald Trump was elected president two days after my first Sunday – and I still maintain that was correlation not causation - it felt like that call to action was even more urgent, and I let myself be seduced by that – maybe we all did in a way.

I mean, George Regas is sitting right there in the pews and I didn't know who George really was, but I sure had this image of George as this icon giant of Justice. And I forgot that God never calls us to be anyone but ourselves and part of me thought I had to live into that, that legacy of George.

And so I did what I truly believe you called me here to do ... – I mean I still believe that is the work we have to do, we are doing and we will continue to do ...

I mean we don't even have to look at the genocidal massacre in Buffalo to know that ... but that is certainly an example of why this work of naming and eradicating white supremacy and anti-black racism has to be at our core...

I still believe that is the work we have to do, we are doing and we will continue to do .. and I had just gotten here, and as I began to launch into this, a disconnect began to develop between us.

As I talked about race and not only looked outward but began to hold the mirror up to ourselves, some of you became hurt and confused. And what I kept hearing from many of you was “why are you shaming us?” and that left me confused and hurt because that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Now, I could have just chalked that up to white fragility ... and let's be honest, I'm sure that was part of it. I mean I struggle with white fragility every day. But this wasn't just discomfort. This was real pain. And I was really trying to figure out what was going on.

And what I will always be grateful for is you. Because leaders in this congregation loved me enough to come up around me and help me see what was happening. And what was happening was I was forgetting things I really knew to be true. And there were three big things I forgot. Things that have to do with that new commandment that Jesus gives us this morning.

First thing I forgot is ... it's all about relationship. Anything with leadership – anything with anything -- is all about relationship. Me knowing you ... you knowing me ... all of us knowing each other. That's where trust and love comes from.

Sally Howard gave me great language for this when she taught me about relationships of secure attachment ... those foundational relationships where we trust deeply that we are loved and safe. You know, the ones we hope to have from our parents but don't always?

There is no limit to how much we can grow and thrive if we have relationships of secure attachment. If we trust we are loved, we can do anything. If we don't trust we are loved, we are toast.

I walked in here and I forgot this was all about relationship. My predecessor [Ed Bacon](#) had been here 23 years. You knew him. He knew you. Pretty much everyone trusted they were loved. I came in and I didn't know you and you didn't know me. And that should have been our first task. And it wasn't. And for that there was a cost.

Second thing I forgot is that search committees for a position are kind of like ... dating.

They are aspirational about themselves and about the other person. And the difference between dating and marriage or any kind of committed relationship is huge.

On one level when you are interviewing for a job, even if you are trying to be intentional – as I was – about being completely honest there is a way that you are putting your best self forward and projecting something to them. And there is absolutely a way the search committee is projecting something to you ... or at least despite their best intentions is unaware of the difference between how the search committee feels and how the congregation feels. It is inevitable.

You all had a wonderful and faithful search committee. I mean ... I fell in love with you because of that search committee ... and all of us are human. And I assumed what they were saying was the opinion and the view of the whole congregation. And I assumed that this congregation somehow had a superhuman level of self awareness about our challenges ... when communities almost never have that.

And I forgot that I needed to learn more and listen not just about what I had been told about you but actually about you – back to “different choice” number one ... it's all about relationship.

Finally, I forgot that you have to lead with appropriate vulnerability. And this one is going to take a little more to unpack.

At All Saints Church, I came into a model – which is incredibly understandable and even inevitable generationally ... that was built on the great man theory of leadership. Here is the rector of the church, everything is centered on him (and here it had always been a him) ... and this is the person ... kind of like Moses is going to provide the vision and we are going to follow them. And you all had had some pretty good Moseses here.

That's like so not my style of leadership. Because I'm a different generation than Ed and George ... and than many of you. I've been shaped differently. I do have a vision ... but it's a vision for community. I do have passions for ministry ... and the leader I want to be (and I don't always do this) is one who works with others to gather the people and trusts that God will work and draw the vision out of all of us together. That's the leader I want to be.

And there is a way that I felt like this crush of attention from this congregation to make everything about me – because the whole congregation was structured to be all about the rector. And what I didn't do was lead with appropriate vulnerability.

Here's what I mean. I was so afraid of it being all about me and not wanting to buy into that ... not because I don't have an ego but because I am so aware of my ego and it scares me. I didn't realize there is no reason in the world someone would walk with or follow someone they don't know, who isn't willing to be vulnerable to them. Particularly when both the journey is pretty uncomfortable!

I forgot that the balance we needed to achieve was to let people get to know me without it all being about me. So when that attention came, I just deflected it.

Someone would say “wow, this is really great about you” and I would say “oh, no ... but it's really about this person” And I would think, yeah, I'm supporting my staff, I'm supporting people, I'm empowering. I wouldn't let you get to know who I was.

I mean, I was living without my family ... they were back in St. Louis still ... and I wasn't letting you in on that was hard for me. I still had burnout and PTSD from Ferguson, I was literally still jumping a foot in the air when someone dropped a fork on the kitchen floor. But I didn't share that. I didn't want to make it about me. I also was buying into this stupid notion that leaders have to be strong ... even though I KNOW that Jesus shows us just the opposite. That leaders don't have to be strong. Leaders have to be honest and vulnerable and willing not only to give love but receive it.

I know a lot of you were trying to tell me this. And I remember it was [MaryAnn Ahart](#) who finally got in my face and said, “Mike, I know you don't want to do this, but you have to talk about yourself.” And she was right ... I didn't want to do it and I needed to. Because why in the world would you share yourselves with me and each other if I'm not willing to share myself with you.

I needed to try to share about myself in ways that don't make you center on me .. but enable you to say, “Wow, if it's safe enough for Mike to tell his story, maybe it's safe enough for me to tell my story.” To be vulnerable enough that it becomes safe for you to join me in that place of vulnerability. Because it's the place of vulnerability that is the place of Christ. That's where all the good stuff happens.

So I forgot those three things ... which are really about the first thing. It's all about relationships ... which really is "it's all about love."

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel.

What we don't hear this morning is what happens before Jesus gives his little speech. It's the story of the last supper in John ... which is not just about the Eucharist, this is where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. It is a profound act of service.

It is not just about scrubbing some toes. It is that life of recognizing our privilege and out of love and joy surrendering it and allowing others to be centered instead of us while not disappearing ourselves. It is hard. It is potentially threatening. It is incredibly vulnerable. We need to trust we are loved and trust we are safe if we are going even to try to live this life of service.

And that is the life that Jesus calls us to. And two thousand years later, it absolutely means recognizing and dismantling white supremacy culture and starting with ourselves. It means looking at our own All Saints community and seeing and hearing who is in positions of dominance and who is on the outside, and as Greg Boyle says, gathering on the margins until the margins disappear under our feet.

And ... to do that, the foundation has to be love. The foundation has to be relationship

Because if the foundation is love. If the foundation is relationship, when we are talking about how we can live these lives of justice in the world ...

...and what we know from what happened in Buffalo is that living lives of justice means standing with those among us who literally are having the guns pointed at them ...

when we are talking about how we can live these lives of justice in the world, each of us can do the hard work because we trust that the community knows me and cares about me. And they're not telling me I'm a bad person and maybe I can earn being good if I do the right stuff – which is some of the most damage church has ever done when we tell that to people.

Many of your first reaction to me wasn't one of trusting God's love or my love it was "is this person even interested in getting to know me." "Does this person even care about who I am?"

Some of you felt that I cared more about issues than about people. What I wasn't telling you is that I had left behind people in St. Louis who had changed my life, people who I had watched get arrested and even beaten by the police and when I left for this big shiny job, they just said 'We love you. We know you. We know you aren't going to sell out and go Hollywood on us. We know you aren't going to forget about us " ... and those voices haunted me. And so I was all mixed up with trying to learn about you and love you and honor those voices and also honor the marginalized voices I was hearing from within this community - and I wasn't doing such a good job of listening to those, either!

And on the congregation's part, we were anxious about losing momentum. And certainly Trump's election didn't help in this regard, but the fear was more deeply ingrained than that. I was told to make giving calls to people I had never even met... even before I arrived in Pasadena. As a community we were so afraid that if we lost momentum, people would leave and giving would stop and the death spiral would begin.

And so, when my wardens told me "we want you to hit the ground running" ... and I was so afraid to disappoint and have you find out that maybe hiring me was a "different choice" that maybe you wouldn't be able to laugh about. ... I not only forgot that it's a marathon, not a sprint ... but that you have to stretch out before you do any of it.

And the impact was that some of you thought I didn't care about you. And some left because of it. And for that I apologize.

The impact was I didn't use, we didn't use this great window of opportunity to build the relationships and in fact we kind of went backwards. And later when I realized this a couple years in, we had to do work of leaning into listening and leaning into communicating my love for you, learning how to be appropriately vulnerable, listening deeply to the impact of what had happened ... and just say "Ok, we're going to stop, I'm going to pause and pull back on some of this stuff ... which was hard for those of you who had been told to wait for so long to begin with ... and we're going to spend a lot more time just listening.

We had to do that work, but then I realized I actually never really named it ... which is why I'm preaching this sermon now.

Because it's five and a half years later. And in some ways, we have come a long way together, and in some ways, we are right back where we started. Because we are – we hope – emerging from this pandemic and discovering that we need to get to know each other all over again.

And there is a deep sense of urgency ... maybe even deeper than before. And we are learning that that sense of urgency is part of white supremacy culture ... and white supremacy culture is doubling down right now. And some of our most treasured rights are under attack. And the work always starts with looking in the mirror and taking the logs out of our own eyes before we can remove the splinters in others. And that is uncomfortable work. Whew!

And ... Jesus is standing among us and saying: "I give you a new commandment: Love one another. And you're to love one another the way I have loved you."

And let's think about how Jesus loved. Let's think about how Jesus loves. Jesus loves by becoming incarnate in our lives. Jesus loves by getting to know us deeply. Jesus loves by showing up with us at the worst times and by dancing with us in the best times.

And that is the work. That is what we get to do. We get to show up for each other at the worst times. We get to dance and sing and shout at the best times. We get to stand with each other in solidarity through the hard times. In every situation, we get to ask, "What does love look like?"

We get to build those relationships of secure attachment with each other and with God ... and as we do there will be no limit to what God can do through us. We can eradicate white supremacy from our lives and show the world what is possible. We can be the beloved community we hear about in Acts where all are sacred and none are profane. We can do all these things and more ...because we will trust so deeply that we are loved so fully.

We have been together five and a half years ... and so many of you have been together so much longer than that ... and some of you have just walked in the door and may be saying to yourselves "what is this guy talking about?" And to all of us I say, stick around, bring your friends, we are just getting started.

I am still getting to know you. And I hope you are still getting to know me. And even more I hope we are all getting to know each other and God a whole lot better. And we need to take the time to continue to do that. That is the work ... and that is also the joy. And all the amazing things God will do through us will spring from that.

Every Saturday at drum circle, we end the same way. We go around to each person there and acknowledge the gift that each has brought to the circle. We look in each other's eyes and say "I give you love, and I receive your love" ... because we know that anything we have been able to accomplish in that circle is only because of love.

That is the heart of All Saints Church. That is what it means to walk with the revolutionary Jesus. That is why Jesus stands among us and says: "I give you a new commandment: Love one another. And you're to love one another the way I have loved you."

I love y'all. Amen.