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**LIKE A PERSON**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 22A-Mt23:1-12*  
LPC, 11/5/17

This past week I had occasion to call the Episcopal Church Medical Trust with a question about my medical and dental insurance. Now usually calling an insurance company is on my list of favorite things to do right down there with having a colonoscopy. But calling any of the service branches of the Episcopal Church has a distinct character.

Whether I call the Medical Trust with questions about my personal insurance, the Church Pension Group with questions about my retirement benefits, or the Church Insurance Company with questions about property insurance on this building, I am always greeted with professional competence, which is unusual enough these days when dealing with an institution, but with scrupulous courtesy, which is even rarer.

First of all, the automated menu is very brief: are you an administrator or a client? Then you are immediately connected with a human being who speaks comprehensible English (although you can also get Spanish on request) who either can answer all your questions or connect you with someone who can.

I've been particularly impressed that since the spring, when I call Episcopal headquarters in New York, I have always been addressed as Dr. Walter as soon as my records are accessed. The use of the title is not something I have ever requested, but these people are clearly trained to extend every courtesy. They clearly regard their profession as ministry.

Now, what is the difference between a job and a ministry? Clearly a job is work any person does to make a living. Ministry is something done by certain people who have been ordained and trained do to serve God and who wear the funny white dresses, right? Wrong.

Ministry does not necessarily have to do with preaching the Bible, visiting the sick, and mentioning Jesus every time you open your mouth. Any job, except one that exploits other people, can be a ministry if approached as ministry. To approach any job, paid or unpaid, as ministry requires only that you look upon your colleagues, bosses, clients, subordinates, even opponents, as fellow children of God, and that you be aware that your association with the person in front of you will either serve the kingdom of God, or it won't.

I once knew a grocery bagger who exemplified the idea of job as ministry. The last dealing I had with this man was probably 1979, but I still remember his name, which was proudly displayed on his apron beside his union pin. His name was Emmett.

Instead of ignoring the customer to chat with the cashier about their next break, Emmett greeted every patron with the utmost courtesy, not just forced friendliness. And then expertly, carefully but efficiently, Emmett bagged your purchase with the cans on the bottom and the bread on the top. And then, making eye contact, Emmett thanked you for your business with a

sincere smile. You left the grocery store feeling like a million bucks. Or better. You left the grocery store feeling like a person, because you had been treated like a person.

I wonder if that might be the secret to ministry: the one factor that distinguishes ministry from a job: treating each person like a person. This actually might be the essence of loving your neighbor as yourself: to regard the other as a person the same way you are a person, with a mind, with feelings, and with something to share with the world. And above all as a person beloved by God.

Following Jesus does not just mean saving yourself. Following Jesus means ministry. This is where those billboards that say, “If you die tonight – heaven or hell?” miss the point. The point of following Jesus is not to save yourself (although following Jesus will do that), but to serve the kingdom of God, and anything that serves the kingdom of God, even it’s just to treat the people you deal with as people, is ministry.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees. Now those of us who have heard the New Testament think of the Pharisees as the bad guys because Jesus so often finds himself in opposition to them. But the Pharisees, by the criteria moral people accept today, were the good guys. They obeyed the commandments. They wanted everybody to obey the commandments. They would be the people who put up replicas of the Ten Commandments in their front yards.

But Jesus says that when insistence on obedience to the commandments results in people being burdened like slaves or animals, in other words when people are treated like less than people, the commandments are as good as broken.

As for Jesus’ warning against the use of titles like “rabbi” or “father” or “instructor” this I think is an example of rabbinic hyperbole: the gross overstatement of a teaching to reach even the densest of students. In other words, I don’t think Jesus wants to stop addressing even our own fathers as “Father.” His point, first of all, is to emphasize that we have one Father in heaven who is above all other fathers. In this particular instance, there is yet another point.

The second point is that when you insist on being addressed by a respectful title, you run the risk of missing the whole point of most of the commandments, which is to treat people like people. Holding yourself above others by the use of honorific titles is a great way to forget that other people are persons the same way you are a person: with a mind, with feelings, and with something to share in the world. And above all as a person beloved by God.

I am flattered to be addressed by the representative at the Episcopal Medical Trust as Dr. Walter. But I am mostly impressed by her spirit of service and ministry, that is to say, her treating me like a person. I am further, through this experience, inspired to try to be as respectful and responsive to others as this person was to me. That is how God’s kingdom grows.

Grow the kingdom. Be a minister. Whatever you do, treat a person like a person.