

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 25, 2020

(If you are home read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud. If you are worshiping in person, please follow along silently.)

Prepare for worship: Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

Call to Worship:

Love the Lord Your God
Love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart.
Love the Lord, your God,
with all your soul.
Love the Lord your God,
with all your mind.
Love the Lord, your God,
with all that you are.

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Centering Words:

When we love God and our neighbors, everything changes.

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Prayer of the Day:

May your love, Eternal God, move all that stands before it. We yearn to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, but often such love is beyond us. Nurture us in your healing love, that fear may hold no sway over us. This we pray in the name of your Eternal Son who taught us to pray: .

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The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith: Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination:

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your Word O Lord our Rock and Redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Old Testament Reading: Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

Psalter: Psalm 90

Epistle Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Special Music

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22: 34-46

Sermon: *Simple, But Not Easy*

Hymn:

Lord I Want to Be a Christian

1. Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart;
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart,
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.
2. Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart;
Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart,
Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart.
3. Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart, in my heart;
Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart,
Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart.
4. Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart;
Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart,
Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart.

From *The United Methodist Hymnal* Copyright 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House, 402

Benediction:

Go forth to love God and love neighbor. Go forth to change the world. Amen

Response:

God Be with You till We Meet Again
God be with you till we meet again;
by his counsels guide, uphold you,
with his sheep securely fold you;
God be with you till we meet again.

From *The United Methodist Hymnal* Copyright 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House, 673

Matthew 23: 34-46

What is the most important law? Is one law or class of laws more important than others? This is the question posed to Jesus. The Pharisees maintained that all the Levitical Laws, all 613, were equally important. The Pharisees considered both the ceremonial law and the moral law as equally important. To the Pharisees the correct response would be that no law was more important than the other. They expected to be able to entrap Jesus into saying that the moral law was more important than the ceremonial law based on earlier encounters.

But Jesus' reply cuts to the heart of the Torah. He basically tells this expert in the law that all of the laws hang on these two laws: to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. This is the heart of the Torah. Jesus also says that this was the message of the prophets; to love God and to love neighbor. As you read the prophetic works you see that the warnings that the prophets gave to Israel was that God would punish them for not loving God and loving neighbor. Jesus is saying that not only the Law, the Torah, but all of scripture hangs on these two commandments.

In Jesus' time all Hebrew scripture consisted of the Torah, the five books of the law, and the prophets. So, Jesus is saying that the whole Bible of the time was based on these two commandments. I believe that holds true for us in our Bible today. The Bible at its core is a book that teaches us how we are to love God and neighbor. As you read your Bibles the question to be asked is how each passage shows us how we are to love God and neighbor.

Love God and love neighbor. That's it. Simple isn't it. If it is that simple, why is there still so much hatred and division in the world. Even in churches there is division. Some people have not experienced love from the church. Yes, it is a simple command to love God and neighbor, but it is not an easy command.

What makes this simple command to love so hard? I believe that there are three things tied up in this command that make it hard.

The first is what we are commanded to do, to love. Often when we think of love, we think of an emotion that gives us warm, fuzzy feelings that attracts us to another. In the Disney movie *Bambi*, as winter ends, all the animals come out of hibernation. All the animals seem to be acting strange. Boy animals seem to be chasing girl animals. Bambi and his friends ask Owl what is the matter with everyone. Owl replies that they are twitterpated, falling in love. Bambi, Thumper and Flower say that they will never be twitterpated but we all know what happens. A girl skunk eyes Flower and he is twitterpated. A girl rabbit wiggles its tail and Thumper is twitterpated. Finally, even Bambi becomes twitterpated. We think of love as being twitterpated, having warm emotions that attract us to another person.

But love is not an emotion. There is an emotional component to love but love is not just an emotion. Let's face it. If love was just having good feelings all the time toward another person, we would probably have a 100% divorce rate. Love is not an emotion but an act of will. By saying that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are saying that we are to work for the well-being of others as much or more than we work for the well-being of ourselves. Fredrich Buechner states, "Jesus is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end."

Love is putting aside our own self interest for the interest of others. In our society today our focus is own self. Look out for number one. It's all about me. We even take selfies and post them on our Facebook page so people can see what we are doing. Our focus is on ourselves.

But to love is to say that the well-being of the object of our love is more important than our own well-being. I know that you may argue that if I don't work for my well-being nobody will. If I just work for the needs of others, who is going to work for my needs? The answer to that, my friends, is simple: others. In a good marriage each partner works for the needs of the other. If I work for the well-being of others then others work for my well-being. Neighbors work for the well-being of neighbors and therefore the well-being of all is met.

The difficulty in loving neighbors is putting aside our well-being for the well-being of neighbors, which leads us to the second way in which this simple commandment is hard. We may be more easily able to do this with people we like or people who are like us. To the Israelites their neighbor was considered to be fellow Israelites. Their interpretation would be that they were to love fellow Israelites but not necessarily anybody else.

For us that would be saying that we only have to love people like us. We only have to work for the well-being of people like us. We only have to love Americans. We only have to love people of our race. We only have to love Christians. We only have to love people we like. That is really pretty easy isn't it? But as Jesus interprets this command to love neighbor, it is very different and difficult.

Jesus has expanded the definition of neighbor. Neighbor was not just fellow Israelites but also enemies. "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (5: 44, NRSV). Jesus would demonstrate this by having at the Last Supper one who would betray him, Judas; one who would deny him, Peter; and ten others who would desert him. In chapter 25: 31- 46 he relates that the ones who would inherit the Kingdom would be those who worked for the well-being of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Thus, we see that by Jesus' definition neighbor includes everyone on the face of the earth. To love our neighbor is to work for the well-being of all people world-wide.

So, yes, loving your neighbor as yourself is difficult. It is difficult because it is hard to put aside our self-interest for the well-being of people we don't like or are not like us. We can see the

difficulty in this command. We are to work for the well-being of others as much as we work for our well-being regardless of who the other is.

But loving God? That is easy. We all love God. We go to church. We make our pledges to give our tithes. Loving God is easy, or is it?

If we consider the definition of love that we have put forth, then loving God would be putting aside our self-interest for the well-being of God. To work for the well-being of God means to work for what God wants from us. We are to love God with our heart, soul, and mind. In other words, we are to give ourselves completely over to God's will. The prophet Micah relates in Chapter 6 that God does not want burnt offerings, but want us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. We love God as we walk with God completely, with all our heart, mind and soul. We walk with God in the direction God has for us to go.

I recently met with my continuing residency group, others that are Provisional Elders moving toward becoming full elders. We meet for learning and for support. This being our first meeting of the year we were asked to share our call stories. Many related that they initially were willing to go part way in the direction God was calling them, me included. Many related that they were willing to go a little way with God. They would be willing to teach, but preach? No way! For all of us it was when we responded to God's call completely with all our heart, mind, and soul that we were able to find the peace that comes from walking with God.

Loving God and loving neighbor is simple but not easy. We may wonder what benefit it makes to the world if we work for the well-being of others and for God's will. Does it really make that much difference? In the grand scheme of things, we may not think our acts of working for the well-being of others make a hill of beans in our world. But we never know.

The evening before my granddaddy's funeral my uncle went to the funeral home, ostensibly to make sure everything was done right, but in reality to have some time of private grief. When he went into the room where granddaddy lay, there was a man standing over the casket. My uncle asked if the man knew granddaddy. The man replied, "This man saved my life."

My uncle was taken aback. He had never heard anything about granddaddy saving someone's life. Granddaddy was not one you would think of when you think of heroic deeds. Granddaddy was a little man, just over five feet tall. So, the man told his story to my uncle.

He was pacing up and down outside the local convenience store when this little man, Granddaddy, drove up in an old pickup truck. As Granddaddy walked by, he asked the man how he was doing. The man said he didn't know why but for some reason he told Granddaddy his story.

He had recently been released from the chain gang. He was determined to go straight and get a job. But no one would hire him because he had a record. He was at the end of his rope.

He said Granddaddy looked him over then told him to get in the truck. He drove him to the local peanut plant and told the man to wait in the truck. (Knowing Granddaddy he probably left the keys in the truck.) A few minutes later Granddaddy came back and told the man to go talk to the owner of the plant (whose name I forget) and he would give the man a job because Granddaddy vouched for him. The man said he was hired and he worked hard and made a good life for himself because he knew he could not let the little man who vouched for him down.

Then the man told my uncle something else. Something Granddaddy didn't know that day. He had a gun in his pocket and the reason he was pacing up and down in front of the store was that he was working up the nerve to go in and rob the store. Granddaddy saved his life.

We may never know how putting aside our self-interest and working for the well-being of someone else may affect their life. But if we all put aside our self-interest and work for God's interest, loving God, walking in the direction God takes us to love neighbor and working for the well-being of others, how might we change the world? How many lives might we save as Granddaddy unknowingly saved that man's life?

Loving God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and loving our neighbor as ourself is simple but not easy. But the more we do it, the easier it gets. And we may well find that the more we give to God and others, the more we receive.

Practice love. Love God completely with your whole being. Love your neighbor wherever and whoever they may be, working for their well-being as much or more than your own. It may be hard at first but the reward is great, for as we give love, we receive love.