

# **“Love God and Neighbor”**

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**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, October 29, 2017**

**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings from Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 and Matthew 22:34-40**

## **1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

*You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.*

## **Matthew 22:34-40**

*‘When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your Holy Spirit and pray that You would take the words and images that we carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from the New Testament and the words that You've laid upon my heart to share this day. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. A word that feeds our souls, guides us in our call, nurtures our faith, comforts our hearts, challenges us to serve. May that word do its work within us, among us, and through us as Your community of faith and may we be faithful to all that that word invites us to be and do. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So I don't know if you know this, but I've signed a memorandum of understanding that when I'm in the pulpit, I will not sing to you [laughter]. Because as you can tell, they do the singing job way better than I would ever dream to do. So thank you for your ministry of beautiful song. But if I had not signed that memorandum, there would be a song that I'd sing. It would go something like this. Sorry [laughter].

Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday all of you Reformed Christians. Happy birthday to you. Because today is our 500th birthday as people of the Reformed faith. Well, almost today.

On October 31st, 1517, a monk named Martin Luther went to the castle door and tacked up 95 Theses that he had about what he thought were some of the problems with the Roman Catholic Church and, in that, began our Reformation that we're a part of. I don't think Martin had any idea that he was beginning a new stream of religion. If you read through his Theses, they're basically an invitation to correct some teachings or learnings of the Roman Catholic Church particularly around the area of indulgences. He saw all these poor people who took what they had, money or goods, and were giving it to the church in order to buy out their cousin who had died and some priest somewhere said that they're in purgatory. But if they gave four chickens and two gold coins, they could get that cousin from purgatory to heaven. And so, these poor folks were doing all that and Martin thought, "You know what? That's not right. This is the church taking advantage of these people and their faith in God."

Martin also was convinced, after reading Romans, that nothing could stand between us and our faith in God. That we had one mediator who was Jesus Christ our Lord. And that through Christ, we could get whatever we wanted in the sense of if we're praying for someone we only need Christ. We don't need Christ and the church and chickens and gold coins. Obviously, like I said, Martin was a monk and it wasn't stewardship season so don't listen to everything he said, all right [laughter]? But the point is, we give now because we're part of something that God is doing on earth. We don't give to get our cousins or our brothers and sisters out of one state and into another that we don't even believe in anymore. Our giving of ourselves, our time, and our money, our chickens, our gold coins if you will, is because we understand that we're part of something special. We have an understanding of how God is at work in the world and what I want to sort of lift up at the beginning here is, in a sense, may be a nerdy thing to lift up in front of you, but I find it to be gospel. The saying of the reformation is that we are reformed and always reforming. And I love that idea, that no matter what, God is still at work in our lives. That we're reformed, we understand that our faith is through Jesus Christ and him alone and that we're saved by that faith. But we also understand that the spirit of God is continually and forever at work in our lives, and in our hearts, and in our minds, and in our souls in order that we might grow in our faith--what Calvin, John Calvin, the great theologian of our tradition, called God's sanctifying presence among us. We have salvation and we have sanctification. We are reformed and always reforming. Think about the potter sitting at the wheel trying to make something that's tall, maybe a vase, and it kind of gets off-center. God is like the potter who's able to take that clay, meaning us, and move it back to the center, put us back on track and continue to work us into the vessel that God would like us all to be. Now the reason that I say this is that we're reformed and always reforming and that we're the vessel is because each of us is made in a peculiar and particular way. No two of us are alike. Each of us have gifts. Each of us have shadow sides. Each of us have our own sense of how God might be at work in our lives. And so when I come to this famous and familiar passage of *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with you all your soul, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself*, I can't tell you what that means for you.

On Thursday night, we do the Bible study in the chapel and that was sort of the question, what does it mean to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind? And my very pastoral response was, I don't know. What do you think it means for you? Because God made you special and you have gifts that are unique. And the spirit of God that's inside you is inside me, it's inside all of us. So God's hope is that you just do your thing, whatever that is, in order to be faithful.

And that that's how you show your love to God because you're allowing all of who you are to be sort of at God's mercy--to allow that spirit to work through you in order to love and honor God and to love and serve your neighbor. So what I'm going to do is give you some examples of what this might look like, but I really want to invite you to realize that the examples I'm giving are just that, they are examples. They are not prescriptive, this is not how it's going to work for everybody. You're going to really know that when I tell you the first one because it's about me and I am a very introverted person.

I need a lot of quiet time in order to stand in this pulpit and preach to you. I need to have just tons of quiet and so I get up every morning almost at 4:00AM and I head to my beloved espresso machine and I make a really good double-tall latte, and if it's not blowing sideways rain or snow, I go outside and I sit in the dark and I look at the stars, and I sit there for about an hour and a half. I breathe, and I pray, and I allow the spirit to lift your face to me, and I offer a prayer for you if it is the will of the spirit. That's how I prepare myself to do ministry. What I've learned is it's also how I enter into loving God because that's how I'm wired, and I get that I am wired distinctly and peculiarly but that's what I do. Others I've known spend time in the Word and they read their Bible quietly for 20 minutes each morning, or they make a list of the people that they need to pray for, and they just keep writing down names. Whatever it is, you need to enter into that deeper trust and allow God to be at work through you and your particularity. There's not a generalization of what that means. Out of that sense of being loved by God and loving God, that dynamism of relationship with the holy, we are then able to turn our attention and be fully present to another and then we love our neighbors as ourselves. Before I entered ministry I had an experience of that, and in a sense, it's modeled here with communion at the table, and us waiting in anticipation of coming forward.

There's something happening and our job as Christians is to respond to it. So before I was in ministry I had this sense that I needed to do a particular thing. My friends had been on vacation and as they were driving home, my wife and I learned that our friend's father had died suddenly and unexpectedly. He happened to be working on our church at the time helping to build the sanctuary, and so everybody in the church was talking to everybody. This was the time before cell phones so we used those things called answering machines. I don't know if you remember but they go beep and there's a red light and all that kind of stuff. What was happening was we were all talking to each other about Jerry's passing and didn't know what to do. We knew that our friends, Chris and Cindy, were coming back from vacation, and what are we going to do? Everything was going crazy, and for some reason, I just had this sense inside of me that said go and tell them. I had asked myself internally if my father died unexpectedly, how would I want to learn about it? And it was obvious I'd want someone to come and tell me, and so I drove to their house and sat on the planter near the front porch for over an hour waiting for them to arrive. And when they arrived I remember seeing their smiling faces as they turned into the driveway, and then that curious, what are you doing here look. They got out of the car and I was crying. I went up to Cindy and gave her a hug and told her that her father had passed away. We went into the house, spent a few more moments together, and then I left as they needed to go and be with her mom. This is my version of what it means to love my neighbor as myself. To have that sense of go and be present. I didn't know what to say, I didn't know anything special. I just had that overwhelming urge to show up, and to be present, and to do for them what I would want to have done for me.

As we talked in the Arise service earlier today, one of the invitations that was shared back with me, is another way that we respond in love to God's invitation to do something. And the person shared about being called to do mission work and someone stood up in front of the congregation, and held up a casserole tin, and said, "Hey, we need casseroles for the homeless people in St Louis." And this person

just said, "I just sensed-- yes, I'll do it." They said yes, to making a casserole and that is them loving their neighbor as themselves. It's that simple. I think often when we hear these great and familiar passages and we think that somehow we need to be superheroes of the faith. We've got to do these big projects, have these big ideas, but I think more importantly loving God and loving our neighbor is what we're supposed to do day in and day out. As we simply make ourselves available to the urgings and promptings of the Spirit and know that we are loved, and we love God, we trust that prompt to then take that step towards our neighbor, and know that that's it. We just need to take that step and the Spirit will take care of the rest.

My prayer for us as we come to to this communion table on this special birthday celebration for us and the reformed faith, is that we feel that nudge of the Spirit and realize that as Christ gives himself again to us and to all people, it is God's love feeding us, our love responding, and then all of that love heading out the door with all of you to bless the world in whatever way you can. I'll join you in that work. Amen.