

**Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn**  
**“It’s Not Complicated”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, October 25, 2020**

**Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17**

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.  
Lord, you have been our dwelling-place  
in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust,  
and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

Turn, O LORD! How long?  
Have compassion on your servants!  
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.  
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
and for as many years as we have seen evil.  
Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.  
Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and prosper for us the work of our hands—  
O prosper the work of our hands!

**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. As we once again listen to your word read, we pray that your spirit will move within us, that you will enlighten our mind, stir up our soul, and soften our heart. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh God for you remain our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In one of numerous occurrences in the Gospel of Matthew, the religious leaders in Jesus' time gathered to ask him questions, but not without ulterior motive. Asking him questions to put him to the test perhaps in order to somehow trap him publicly. They did so on one occasion by asking him, by what authority do you do these things? On another occasion, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? And still another occasion recorded in Matthew, they ask him a question about the resurrection. Each time, Jesus managed to, in a sense, turn the tables on them, and instead of them succeeding and trapping him, he succeeded in trapping them. So, you would think that they would learn. Appears they are slow learners. Because they still haven't learned. And so, it is that, on this particular occasion that we read our scripture lesson today, they gathered, once again, and the lawyer among them put this question to Jesus—"Which of the great commandments of the law is the greatest commandment?", of course, attempting to, once again, trap Jesus. And he said it with a kind of sarcasm, I would guess. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now, perhaps more often than not, so-called, or at least self-proclaimed, theological scholars and educated ministers that ask such a question, produces a rather complicated long-winded discussion with each side of the debate attempting to one up the other. In my time in the ministry for all these years, I've had more than enough of all of that. Perhaps too much of all of that. And it especially can occur at Presbytery meetings where we are gathered to question a candidate for ordination. Particularly in some presbyteries, the candidate is questioned to put him or her to the test to find out whether or not they are orthodox enough, whether or not there is some kind of a radical statement that they are uttering. And, sadly, sometimes the questioner just wants to hear his or her voice and display some kind of theological cleverness or knowledge.

Now we certainly can debate theological points. We can certainly have discussions. There's nothing wrong with that. We can debate the finer points of theology particularly in Sunday school classes or other settings like that. And we can disagree and argue over different points of doctrine wondering, for example, about the meaning in the Nicene Creed of the phrase, "true God from true God," or wondering why Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost. And I'm wondering now if you are thinking, "Is he really going to talk about all of this for the rest of this sermon?" Well, thankfully, no. Because, thankfully, I have been rescued by Jesus himself. In our scripture lesson today, this lawyer confronts Jesus with this question, "Which is the greatest commandment?" expecting Jesus to somehow engage with him in theological discourse. You see, it was a test. Could the lawyer prove Jesus to be somehow heretical publicly in front of everybody against the Mosaic Law in some way? Could the lawyer catch Jesus so that he looked like he was untrustworthy? But upon hearing the question, Jesus gives a very brief yet comprehensive--very brief yet comprehensive reply using few but memorable words. Jesus simply says, "Love your God with all of your heart, mind, and soul. And love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments, hang all of the law and the prophets well, I must say at that point no one dared ask Jesus anything else. The questions miraculously ended. Love God, and love your neighbor. Love, it was a very simple straightforward reply. It's not complicated, and yet somehow manages to make it more complicated by attaching all kinds of other provisions to what you must believe and what you must do if you want to be a Christian, if you want to be a follower of Jesus.

The virgin birth, the resurrection of the body, what do you think about the substitutionary theory of the atonement? All of these debates, they certainly may have their place. And don't mistake me, it's certainly okay to have doctrine, but I think we must learn to hold doctrine lightly. Because the bottom line, as Jesus states, is to love God and to love our neighbor. And just in case you wonder about what the meaning of neighbor is to Jesus, when someone asked him who is my neighbor, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan just to make sure that we knew that neighbor transcended race and class, ideology, ethnic group religion, even enemies. All people were to be our neighbors. A man named Bryan Stevenson, who is an author and who has a prison ministry that is really excellent and stellar, Has written a book called Just Mercy. And in that book, he further explicates what for him is the meaning of loving God neighbor. He begins by making the case that it is distance. It is isolation. It's living in a kind of bubble that allows injustice to flourish. And then he argues that it is instead proximity to one's neighbor, whoever that neighbor might be, that turns our hearts toward love, and to restorative justice. That we may have to work and work pretty hard to get beyond our usual social circles, our usual acquaintances, it's not just the neighbor next door. We may have to work pretty hard, especially to be related somehow to others who are not part of our social circles, who are not part of our normal interactions. We may need to work hard to create understanding and relationship and therefore love

with a wider social expansion. It indeed may involve hard and intentional work on our part to widen these social circles.

No one that Jesus' way was easy. But through it all, we must remember we should not lose sight of the simplicity of what Jesus is saying. And we must strive not to complicate it with all kinds of "what ifs" or fine doctrinal and theological debates. The bottom line, the greatest commandment, love God and love neighbor, as Jesus told us. In his story in John Meacham's recent book on the life of John Lewis, entitled *His Truth is Marching On*, Meacham reiterates a story from John Lewis' time early in his life when he was in Nashville and he was enrolled in seminary in his 20's. He had already had contact with Martin Luther King Jr. and then contact later with the Reverend James Lawson. John Lewis was beginning to learn all about nonviolent action on behalf of justice, and it seemed to Lewis to fit in well with his developing understanding of the Gospel and with what he was learning in seminary. But during this time in Nashville, a very tragic incident happened. A fellow civil rights worker, an African-American man named Dr. Thomas Brewer, was shot to death in Columbus, Georgia. Brewer was a voting rights advocate and member of the NAACP, and he had gone into a store to ask the white store owner to testify about an incident of police brutality that had occurred right near his store. And he was wondering if he would testify to that incident. And in the course of talking with this man, the store owner took out a gun and shot Brewer. Opened fire seven times. He shot him and later was completely exonerated by a grand jury. Sadly, not unusual in that era. Maybe not completely in ours. But describing that incident in his memoirs, Lewis, who said he was jolted to his core by the killing and subsequent acquittal, nonetheless was surprised at his own inner pacific reaction to the violence.

Curiously, Lewis wrote, "Especially to many people with whom I had shared my very strong feelings about racism, and my feelings have not in essence changed since that time," Lewis wrote, "I did not feel anger or ill will toward white people in general. I didn't really know that many white people at that time, but I refuse to believe, I refuse to believe that all white people acted or felt like the ones I had read about. I know, he wrote, "it might sound simplistic. But then some of the most basic truths in this world are just what you boil them down to. Basic." Some of the most basic truths in this world are just that when you boil them down. Basic. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these, Jesus wrote, hang all the law and the prophets. Basic. Foundational. God so loved us that God gave to us and never abandoned us. In turn, we strive to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.