

“Love Isn’t Love ‘Till You Give It Away”

September 10, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania

The Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”*
(Roman 13:8 NRSV)



Photo Credit: Officer Daryl Hudeck rescues Catherine and Aiden Pham (13 months old, sleeping).
David J. Phillip/AP; www.businessinsider.com/aiden-pham-hurricane-harvey-rescue-photo-2017-8

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Over twenty years ago, I had the privilege of serving as an interim pastor of the Latrobe Presbyterian Church. This is the congregation in the heart of Westmoreland County that has counted among its members PGA golf great, Arnie Palmer and his lovely family and Pittsburgh's beloved neighbor, Fred Rogers, for whom everyday was a beautiful day in the neighborhood!

I shared this time of service alongside the late Rev. Dr. Richard Eyster Sigler who made it his habit before every sermon he preached to recite, out loud, the text of Mark 12:28-34 -- much as I pray the prayer (above) in each and every sermon I deliver. The text from Mark follows:

"One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question."

Dick began each sermon in this way because the whole of the Gospel, he said, was expressed in this passage in a way that safeguarded whatever he would say to illumine this fundamental message. If one learned nothing else from listening to the sermon being preached, the hearer could, at least, grab hold of these words from the Gospel of Mark which are a complete statement of what we as disciples of Jesus Christ are called to do. The passage quotes two Scriptures familiar to every follower of the Hebrew Bible: two essential commandments found in the Torah -- Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:17 (Note: please remember that the Hebrew Bible was THE Bible that Jesus used while ministering on earth; there was no "New Testament" at this point!)

The thrust of this simple exposition of the Gospel is love in two directions: vertically in our relationship to God (Deut. 6:4-5) and horizontally in our relationships to one another. This is part and parcel of what our lectionary texts are saying this morning.

Though the passage from Matthew focuses on the ways and means of dealing with members of the body who sin, be careful in the reading however! In the end, it sounds like Jesus is willing to abandon to a dire strait the recalcitrant, stubborn, and unmoving among us: *"Let such a one be to you as*

a Gentile or a tax collector . . ." Both of these types of people were those that Jewish society dismissed out of hand. But Jesus, in providing a plan of action, offers his own self as the example by which that reconciliation finally might occur. His way with Gentiles and tax collectors was always to love them even more, be with them even more, and make peace with them even more; to get to know them, break bread with them, and to build bridges of relationship with them even more . . . Jesus was always giving his love away. Recall his interactions with Zacchaeus, the tax collector, the *"wee little man who climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see."* (Do you remember learning that old Bible school song?) Zacchaeus knew he wasn't liked; he certainly could not elbow his way to the front of the crowd that pressed in on the street as Jesus passed by, so he climbed up into a sycamore tree to glimpse him from above. And just then, Jesus stopped in the way and called to him in the tree *"And said: Zacchaeus! You come down; for I'm going to your house today!"* And there, in his home, Jesus built a relationship with him; a relationship that changed Zacchaeus forever. (Please see Luke 19:1-10)

Jesus was always giving his love away. So much so that reconciliation -- even among the most cussed was not only possible, but was inevitable; it is God's nature, as expressed in the life of Jesus, to love always.

Paul's message in the Letter to the Romans also echoes the words of Mark's Gospel, oft-quoted in Dick Sigler's sermons, because it is the doing of the law that the Apostle Paul wants to clarify -- we are to love one another, for in doing so, we can't help but fulfill the law's demands. We work out horizontally in the reach out to others that reaching grasp of God in Christ for us; this becomes the impetus for our actions in this life. . . Paul says that all of the commandments are summed up in this one: *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Dick Sigler was right. The gospel we profess is that simple: *"Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself"* . . . That simple, that basic . . . AND THAT HARD!

Loving God is a difficult thing to do most days, but the commandment says that we should do so with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength . . . I've NEVER been divided in my heart, have you? Pulled in one direction while pulling in another? I have ALWAYS been filled with lightness and truth in my soul; never once mired in dankness and darkness or dispirited about anything or anyone else, have you? And I have NEVER had my mind filled with anything else that might crowd God and thoughts of his being and presence in my life out of my waking consciousness . . . I've NEVER been confused or distracted or obsessed in thoughts that pull me away from loving God . . . And, when it comes to strength, why, I am a toned and fit paragon of spiritual discipline -- yeah, right. I am more of a 98 lbs. weakling *before the strength and conditioning has ever begun!* The truth of it is that loving God is hard work!

And the second command is equally hard, because it is difficult to love our neighbors -- especially when we focus on all the things about them that drive us crazy! Yet, even more, I am convinced it is hard for us to love ourselves first! If we cannot find room to love ourselves; forgive ourselves; allow room for ourselves -- in the course of life's ups and downs -- to get up and try again when we fail. If we find this hard to do, how will we truly extend to others that same gracious hand?

Love is a gift that is given to us by the God who loves us and desires that we grow in our love and in doing so express the works of love in how we treat each other. "*Owe no one anything, except to love one another;*" says Paul to the Christian disciples in Rome, "*for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" (Romans 13:8) . . . And he adds, "*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*" (Romans 13:10)

Rather than spending our time trying not to do certain things -- making the law a guardian against bad behavior -- we can shift the focus to the people with whom we live and move and have our being and begin to see others in a different light -- as God sees them; his beloved ones; as Christ saw them in his earthly walk as people who needed him to love them -- often because they were being crushed by life's sometimes heavy loads.

I have over fifty new students at Robert Morris University in several classes this semester. Each one represents a universe unto himself/herself of fears, doubts, joys, cares, hopes, dreams, questions, answers, experiences, naiveté, attitudes, angers and loves . . . I can focus on the particulars of the things that distract me about each of student: the things that can get in the way, or I can do my best to love them as God does; giving to them all that I can in the love that is given to me by God.

One thing about a new college semester -- it keeps me on my toes! It is hard to stay stuck in one place and/or become rigid when each new class has energies and vitalities that force me out of hiding! I am learning about musicians, their music, and artists and their mediums of expression I have never heard before . . . I use to pride myself in being so "au currant", but wowie! I am behind the times! And the slipstream seems to be picking up speed putting me farther and farther behind the curve! Each new semester calls for me to gird up my loins as if running a race -- and in modern parlance -- needing to *wake up and smell the coffee!* The days are moving on. . .

Paul says this to the Romans when it comes to loving: "*You know what time it is,*" he says, "*it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*" (Romans 13:11) The urgency for him is not unlike the urgency of eating on the run we find expressed in the Passover passage from Exodus. There is no time for ease, eat the meal with one hand while holding your walking staff in the other. It is a new day -- a new time!

Paul concludes his words with this, "*Put on the Lord Jesus Christ . . .*" That is, wear him like a garment by which you die to self and take on his love; yours now to give away. When we enter into baptism, we take off the old self and put on the new; and that life is meant to be a life of love that is our gift back to God (vertically) and out to our neighbors (vertically).

"One evening just before the great Broadway musical star, Mary Martin, was to go on stage in 'South Pacific', a note was handed to her. It was from Oscar Hammerstein, who at that moment was on his deathbed. The short note simply said:

'Dear Mary, a bell's not a bell till you ring it. A song's not a song till you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away.'

After her performance that night many people rushed backstage, crying, 'Mary, what happened to you out there tonight? We never saw anything like that performance before.' Blinking back the tears, Mary then read them the note from Hammerstein. Then she said, 'tonight, I gave my love away.'"ⁱ

Indeed, the love of God that is in your heart is not put there to stay -- Love isn't love till you give it away. May we always find ourselves giving that love away. . .

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ James S. Hewett, from Illustrations Unlimited, "Giving Love Away", p. 322. Hammerstein was quoting the poetry of Chanh Kha.