

SHARING THE WORD

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on August 20, 2017 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)

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 neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

- Matthew 22:34-40

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Perhaps I should preface my sermon today by saying I did not choose this reading for this particular Sunday. This text was chosen by our Creative Worship Team months ago, as they planned their Summer Sandbox series. But it is fascinating how the Word of God sometimes intersects with current events.

This story has Jesus responding to a question from a Jewish Pharisee, which is interesting, since the Wednesday morning Engaging Faith study group just learned this week about ancient Judaism, and had a discussion on Thursday with a modern Jewish rabbi. The Pharisees -- who are often portrayed negatively as hypocrites in the Christian gospels -- were actually one of many groups in ancient Judaism. They believed the commandments given to the Jewish people by God, through Moses, were a great gift – the blueprint for living as God’s people. The Pharisees sought to learn and understand these commandments as thoroughly as they could, and live them as faithfully as possible. That is really not a bad goal.

And so it would be perfectly reasonable for a Pharisee to ask a Jewish rabbi (Jesus) about those commandments: Which, of all the commandments in the Jewish *Torah*, was the greatest – the most important of them all? Many of us have learned about the Ten Commandments found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, but according to Jewish tradition there are actually 613 commandments in the *Torah* – the first five books of the Bible. It is an interesting question, although the story says the Pharisee asked Jesus in order to “test” him, suggesting the Pharisee was curious whether Jesus really knew his stuff, or that it was some kind of trap. Jesus responded with two commandments. These were not original with Jesus; they were part of Jewish tradition for hundreds of years:

“‘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 neighbor as yourself.’”

And he concluded, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In other words, this is the core – the heart and soul of all Jewish belief about what it means to live as one of God’s people. And, I believe, the heart and soul of Christian belief as well.

Talk about getting down to basics. The essence of our faith, distilled down to two basic teachings. Easy to say. Easy to memorize. But an ongoing challenge to live out.

How many of us consciously try to love God with everything we are and do? When we are working, voting, having fun, spending money – do we wonder whether what we are doing is pleasing to God? Does our worship extend into our weekly lives? When we pray, do we spend as much time listening as we do talking? It seems to me that would be what love requires.

I'm sure we all have work to do on this commandment.

But mostly today I want to focus on the second of these two commandments – loving our neighbors as ourselves. The two commandments are not separate, but inextricably linked. One cannot love God without loving people. One cannot love people without loving God. Like the old song says, “You can't have one without the other.” The church is the place we learn to love God and neighbor, and where we can do it together.

In the wake of the recent tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia, it needs to be said that the belief that one race of people is in some way superior to another is ignorant of biology, history, and culture, and a violation of Jesus' clear teaching. The idea that some lives are expendable, or don't matter, is antithetical to the beliefs of all great religions – not just Christianity. I suppose just expressing racial supremacy beliefs is freedom of speech protected by our Constitution. But threatening people with violence or prejudice because of it is against our laws. And enacting laws that institutionalize bias violate the basic founding principle of this nation that “all men are created equal.” Defending those ideas should be sufficient grounds for saying that someone is un-American, and clearly un-Christian.

Some might argue that we should also be loving to people who hold racist beliefs. True. But I think we tend to have a soft, sentimental idea of what love is. Love is not letting anyone believe and do what they want. Love is not letting someone hurt you or others. Any parent knows that. Sometimes love requires us to say “No” to dangerous beliefs and behaviors – to protect the one holding or enacting those beliefs, as well as those who might be harmed by them. We are supposed to love those people as well. Our love is not restricted to family, or nation, or race, or gender.

I guess I just needed to say something about that. I hope that didn't really need to be said here.

But now on to an interpretation of this story about Jesus that more directly affects this congregation: What does it mean for us to love our neighbor today?

I have been reading about this church's history and listening to stories. When this church was founded more than 115 years ago, it was pretty clear who those neighbors were. They were the Volga Deutsch – the Russian German farmers who emigrated to this country seeking freedom to make a living, worship as they believed, maintain their language and culture, and avoid military conscription. The founders of this church helped other newcomers of a similar background make a new home in a strange and sometimes hostile new country.

During World War I, many other people in this country became suspicious of people from German backgrounds. I read a story about how two people of German heritage were criticized for speaking their native language here in Colorado – and were told to learn to speak American if they were going to live in America. That kind of intolerant behavior still happens today!

That tradition of hospitality to people of German heritage continued during World War II, when local farmers had German P.O.W.s being held in Colorado help on their farms – becoming friendly with them, and even having them for dinner.

It is a great history. There are many UCC churches in this country that are in a similar situation – they were started by German immigrants to minister to the needs of those newcomers. I heard one church growth consultant say that there are many churches in our denomination that are well prepared for the next wave of German immigration.

The problem is – it isn't happening. And there are no signs that it will. Instead, as happens to just about every church that starts out serving ethnic immigrant communities, immigration patterns change, there are fewer new people, and younger generations become assimilated to the wider American culture.

We want to love our German heritage neighbors. But there are fewer and fewer of them. Instead, we find ourselves in the midst of Hispanic neighbors, and Black neighbors, and Asian neighbors, and Muslim neighbors, and all kinds of others.

It seems to me – after more than two whole weeks here – that this church is facing a critical choice during this interim time and in the years to come. We can celebrate the fact that we did a great job in the mission for which this church was started – providing hospitality and support to German farmers. We were very successful! We can say, “Gut gemacht -- Job well done!” And then we can close our doors, because there isn't a need for this kind of church any more. Or, we can say, “We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Who are our neighbors right now? Who, in our community, needs the healing love of Jesus' message and a welcoming community – and is not able to find one in the many other churches that now can be found throughout Loveland and the surrounding area?”

That is the big question we must wrestle with together. The answer will have a big impact on who we will be seeking in a new pastor.

The early Christians wrestled with this same issue. The first Christians were raised as Jews – just as Jesus was – and some of the earliest Christian communities were most Jewish believers. But only a small percentage of Jews became followers of Jesus. Instead, many Gentiles responded to the gospel message. Some Jewish believers weren't happy about it – they thought those Gentiles should become Jews first, before they could be followers of Jesus. They regarded some of the practices of those Gentiles as distasteful and disgusting. But the early Christian church came to believe that God was calling them to expand their boundaries – to include the strange outsiders as well as the people like them.

So who are the neighbors we should love and minister to? I invite your ideas. Who do you know that needs to be welcomed? But may I suggest a few ways our United Church of Christ traditions can reach out to people who don't think they have a place in the church?

Because we are non-creedal church, and we allow freedom of thought, we can be a place of welcome and love for people with doubts, and questions, and those who have a hard time believing that anyone who isn't a Christian will suffer eternal punishment. That is a different message from many other Loveland-area churches.

Because the United Church of Christ is an Open and Affirming church, we can be a place of welcome and love – and full involvement – for lesbian, gay, transgendered, and otherwise non gender-norm conforming people. And we can say that publicly. I have been a part of several ONA UCC churches, and trust me – it has been a blessing.

We can be a place of welcome and love for other recent immigrants – helping to make this a home away from home. We have experience in doing this successfully!

Finally, we can be a church that recognizes a huge change in our American culture: That many people today are not looking to be a part of a church; who have no idea what happens in a church; and may even be afraid to go into a church building because they believe churches are judgmental and dangerous. We can instead, share the Word – the message of love and acceptance and forgiveness and empowerment that is the good news of Jesus – out on the streets and sidewalks of Loveland. We can take the church outside these historic and hallowed walls, and meet people where they are. Sometimes we can best love our neighbors by getting out!

These are some of our options for living our calling as followers of Jesus – to love God with all we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can make an important first step by going outside after worship today to share the Word.

Amen.

Robert J. von Trebra