

It's All About Love
Mark 12:28-34
June 30, 2019 – Third Sunday after Pentecost

It was eight years ago, July 3, 2011, that I first stepped into this pulpit. I preached a sermon which I entitled “The Gospel According to Reverend Mark.” Do you remember it? I do. In fact it has sort of become my “signature sermon” if there is such a thing. No I’m not going to preach the entire sermon again here; but I’d like to recap it.

The Bible starts with creation. God created humans in God’s image to be perfectly loving individuals in perfect relationship with the Holy. Then, in Genesis 3:8, we read that man and the woman hid themselves from God. The man and the woman intentionally separated themselves from God; and the whole rest of the Old Testament is about God seeking to restore that perfect relationship. Oh, it would be renewed for a while, but humanity would consistently fall away again.

And then came Jesus. In the person of Jesus, God said, “Okay, if you would come to me, I’ll come to you,” and the Word became flesh and blood to live our life, to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us, and ultimately to die for us only to rise again to a newness of life with a promise to be with us always, even to the end of time.

Folks, that’s the entire story of the Bible. It’s what I call the Macro-Story. There are sixty-six books in the Protestant Bible, but ultimately there is only one theme; and that is the story of God’s love. How often have I told the children and youth that come up for our Children’s Moment that the most important news in the whole world is the fact that God loves them; and the greatest gift in all the world is the gift of God’s amazing love.

In the First Letter of John, the author states, “God is Love.” That statement is, at the same time extremely simple and extremely complicated. It’s a statement that all love emanates from God. God is the source of all love. The love we might feel for a spouse or a child or a parent or a friend is a gift from God. The love we might feel for life itself is a gift from God. God is love. And evil or sinfulness has been defined as separation from God. Sin, at its most rudimentary level, is the absence of godly love.

I stated a few weeks ago, and I state it again, when the great and rather verbose German theologian Karl Barth was asked to summarize all the many volumes he had written in a single sentence, he stated, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

So eight years ago, in my first sermon here, I told you that the whole story of the Bible is that God loves you. And today, in my last sermon as your pastor, I tell you that you and I and all of God’s people are called to do likewise. I have

preached on the call to love a lot in my time with you; but today, as I consider how I would summarize my verbose preaching, I could not avoid highlighting one more time The Great Commandments: love God; and love your neighbor as yourself. And, I have repeatedly told you that there are three commandments here: 1) Love God; 2) Love your neighbor; and 3) Love yourself.

It is from the Great Commandments that John Wesley formulated “the General Rules” for his Methodist Societies. I have regularly given one of these books to our new members joining the church; and I gave one to each of our confirmands a couple weeks ago. It’s entitled “Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living” written by Bishop Rueben Job.

Rule #1: Do no harm; avoid evil. Do you hear the love in that? If we love our neighbors, all our neighbors and if we love all of God’s creation, we will certainly do no harm. And... If we truly love ourselves, love our bodies, our minds, our souls, and our spirits, we will not engage in activities that are harmful. We will maintain healthy lifestyles. We will avoid evil; and, as I preached last week, we *will* have peace in our hearts.

Rule #2: Do good. This has been expanded to: Do all the good you can for everyone you can in every way you can at every time you can. What could be more loving than “doing all the good you can” for *all* others yes, indeed; and also for self.

Rule #3: John Wesley said, “Attend upon all the ordinances of God.” Rueben Job simplifies this to “Stay in love with God.” Friends, we are called. We are called to stay in relationship with God. In the past eight years, I have repeatedly stated that the most important verse, or at least one of the most important verses in the entire New Testament is the promise of Jesus in the last verse of Matthew’s Gospel: “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Yes, I believe we are called to stay in relationship with the risen Christ, the Christ who is always with us. I sometimes wonder how our lives might be different, how our relationship with other people might be different, how our love of self might be different, if we were constantly aware that Christ is with us, always with us, walking beside us, guiding us, and loving us.

Three rules: Do no harm; do good; and stay in love with God. Three Commandments: Love God; love all your neighbors; and love yourself. That’s the Christian call. That’s the Christian life.

As I was considering this, my final service in my role as your pastor; I told our Worship Committee that I would like the privilege of sharing Holy Communion with the congregation one more time, for the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a sacrament of love. It is a sacred reminder of God’s love for us, a love that is truly with us always and a love that we share with each other.

The entire ritual is wonderfully special, but I have often said that, for me, the words of the liturgy that I find most meaningful is the section in the prayer: “Lord, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” That’s what the word “communion” means – to come together, to commune, to be one.

God is love. Christ is God. Therefore, being one with Christ is truly communing with the ultimate expression of love; and communing with each other is sharing in the love with which God has gifted us, as we go forth to share that love with the world. And friends, I remind you again of my sermon from last week. “The world” means “the world.” “The world” means everyone, no exceptions, because everyone is created by God. Everyone is a child of God. I fully believe that God loves every person on this planet. (It’s what Wesley called Prevenient Grace.) God loves every person on this planet, and so should we.

And so, I leave you with three thoughts:

- 1) God loves you.
- 2) We are all called to: Love God; Love our neighbors; and Love ourselves.
- 3) Remember, Christ is with us always, wherever we go and whatever we do. Christ is there.

Thanks be to God for the gift of God’s amazing love. May we all be in ministry to spread that love at all times, in all places to all people.

Amen.

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