

**First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida**  
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### **The Fundamentals of Faith**

Matthew 22:34-46 (NRSV)

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, [35] and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. [36] "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" [37] 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.' [38] This is the greatest and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [40] On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

[41] Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: [42] "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." [43] He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

[44] 'The Lord said to my Lord,  
"Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies under your feet" '?

[45] If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

[46] No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

### **GOLF FUNDAMENTALS**

I play golf. I use it as a way to get away from things for a few hours. The great golf instructor, Harvey Pennick said that he thought golf did more to keep people sane than any psychiatrist. Perhaps, but those of you who know golf could make the argument that golf has also driven more than one person a little crazy.

Golf has frustrated some of the best athletes in the world. My favorite example is Charles Barclay, the former center for the Philadelphia 76ers. This is one of those times when I wish I had one of those fancy new sanctuaries with an overhead screen. I would play clip of Charles trying to hit the golf ball, and you would see what I mean. Charles can twist himself into the strangest shapes in order to make a swing at a stationary ball. When he plays golf it actually looks like it hurts!

I know the feeling. Sometimes golf can be wonderful diversion, and sometimes I agree with the old line. They call it golf because all the other four letter words were taken! A former member of our church, Hal Neuhard used to get so frustrated with his game that he would say that he was going to take three months off and then quit.

But, he never did. We golfers are addicted to the game. But, how can we regain our form when the game becomes a chore instead of a pleasure? One instructor told me if you play bad once,

forget it. If you play bad two or three times check the fundamentals of your setup. Make sure your grip, aim and setup are correct. 90% of poor play is due to neglect of the fundamentals.

We golfers don't want to believe that advice. We prefer to believe in magic instead. If only we can get the right club or the right golf ball or the right training aid then we will improve. And we neglect the fundamentals.

## FAITH FUNDAMENTALS

It seems to me that the same is true when it comes to faith. Sometimes we can sing with gusto about God's amazing grace. We once were lost but now we are found. We were blind but now we see. Our fears are relieved by knowledge of this amazing grace.

But, one day we wake up and that grace doesn't seem so amazing any more. We begin to have doubts about our life. We may even begin to doubt God.

At that point like a frustrated golfer we begin to cast about for an answer. Maybe a different church would help. Maybe if we went on one more spiritual retreat. Maybe we should read more religious books.

I guess all of those things might help. But, most often they don't. We tend to have spiritual problems because we have neglected the fundamentals of the faith.

So, what are the fundamentals of the faith?

We often talk about people who are fundamentalists (sometimes with disdain), but fundamentalists are simply Christians who believe that there are certain fundamental beliefs that must be held if we are to retain our distinctive identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I think that it is right to think about what is fundamental to the faith. But, we need to make sure that we get the fundamentals right. What are those fundamentals? What do we need to remember above all else?

If we are wrong about the fundamentals we can have a faith that is as odd and ineffective as Charles Barclay's golf swing. We need to find an instructor who will remind us of the fundamentals so that we can play our "faith game" in a state of grace.

## JESUS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS

Fortunately, we have such an instructor. Jesus was asked by the religious leaders of his day, "Teacher, which law is the greatest?" In other words is there one fundamental that is greater than all the rest?

Jesus wasn't able to boil it down to just one fundamental, but he was able to boil it down to two. One commentator said that these two fundamentals are like the two hinges upon which the door of faith hangs.

Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love God. Love neighbor. These are the fundamentals. Those are the core beliefs upon which the faith rests. All the rest is just commentary.

It sounds like John Lennon of the Beatles had it right, "All you need is love." Maybe. But, what is love? Is it an emotion? Is it passion? Is it doing what makes us happy?

This past week the atheists in Great Britain decided to do some advertising. They wrote on the side of those big, red double-decker buses something like, "God probably doesn't exist so just sit back and enjoy the ride."

Unwittingly they made a good point. If God doesn't exist, all we can do is just sit back and enjoy the ride.

If God doesn't exist there is no foundation for making moral judgments. If there is no ultimate authority on the matter, how can we say what is a loving or just action?

We could say that we will do what is best for the common good. But, there is much disagreement about that. For example, the communists will take your property and redistribute the wealth in the name of the common good. They would say that this is the loving thing to do. I would say this is a horrible thing to do.

Without a divine example of love the term becomes nebulous. So, the atheists have it right. If God doesn't exist, the best we can do is sit back and enjoy the ride. But, if God does exist, the most important thing in the world is to get our lives in line with God's plans and purposes.

## LOVE GOD

This is love, realigning our lives in accordance with God's will. According to Jesus love doesn't begin with us; it begins with God. In fact the Bible tells us that God is love. Love begins when we recognize God in our lives and in the creation that surrounds us.

For example, this past week two families in our church have been touched by a new birth. The wonder of that event goes beyond just the birth of baby and the happiness of a particular family. It is as if God has allowed us to participate in the miracle of creation. We get a glimpse of something holy. And it transforms us.

This is fundamental to our faith. We must learn to see the gracious love of God in all things. We must learn to see God in the immensity of the night sky, the excitement of a new discovery, the pleasure of a delicious meal and the warm comforting presence of a good friend.

When we love God with our heart soul and mind life becomes more than just another ride to nowhere. Life has a plan and a purpose.

That's why the shorter catechism makes this the first question, "What is the chief end of (men and women)?" What is the point of our journey? What's it all about? Why are we here? And the answer is the "chief end" is to "glorify God" and to enjoy God forever. Or, to put it another way, the main point of life is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind.

## LOVE NEIGHBOR

But, the example of Jesus will not allow us to make this love of God into a theoretical thing. Love of God is not primarily about a mystical experience. Love of God is not about the ability to quote the Scripture from memory or having a theology that is absolutely orthodox.

Remember that the religious leaders who tested Jesus knew the Scripture. They were fastidious in following the law. Their theology was kosher. But, for them love of God was more about right theology than right action toward their neighbor.

And that is why they came into conflict with Jesus.

In Matthew 23:23 (NRSV) we read,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."

The Scriptures didn't say anything about tithing the herbs and grains mentioned in this passage. But, these religious leaders wanted to make sure that all their bases were covered. Some of them would even give a portion of their spices and grains to God. But, according to Jesus they neglected the more important command to love their neighbor.

## GNATS AND CAMELS

Let's not get too involved in criticizing the religious leaders of Jesus' day. In my experience the church today often does the same thing. We get so involved in struggles over controversial issues, issues that are often not clearly dealt with in Scripture.

We say that our divisive struggles are a matter of justice or mercy or peace. But, I have come to believe that in practice the result is that we often (as Jesus once put it) "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24). We are bogged down by theological minutiae while we neglect obvious opportunities for common mission. Our theological and political battles become excuses for a lack of loving action toward our neighbors in need.

Let me suggest a radical idea. Conservative and liberal Christians, Democrats and Republicans have more in common than they have in difference.

And we have used our relatively small number of differences to excuse a lack of meaningful action. We have allowed minor differences to interfere with our love of neighbor. I think the time has come for us to quit straining at gnats and swallowing camels.

I like to study church history because it gives me a sense of perspective. Many of the major theological and political controversies of the past seem rather ridiculous today. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Who cares?

And I have to wonder how the theological and political controversies of our day will be viewed by someone in the future. I suspect our arguments will seem just as ridiculous.

God in Christ has loved us with an unconditional, sacrificial love, and we are called to love in the same way.

## NO STRINGS

I saw a children's sermon once that really illustrated this well. My children's coordinator had printed the word love in great big letters on card stock. And to that card she had attached a number of strings with their own little messages. The messages said things like, "I'll love you if you love me first" and so forth.

She explained that this is how we often love. We love with strings attached. And then she dramatically cut all the strings, and said, "This is how God loves. God loves with no strings attached. And that's how God wants us to love as well."

Isn't that a great example of God's love? The Bible makes it clear that loving God is always connected to our love of neighbor. In I John we read, "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. [21] The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." 1 John 4:20-21 (NRSV)

Divine love always has a human component. That's why Jesus couldn't summarize the law in just one command. It took two. As one theologian put it, God's love always has a vertical and a horizontal component. Indeed that's the meaning of the incarnation. Divine love is revealed in the man, Jesus.

## THE COST OF LOVE

The answer that Jesus gives in our lesson for today was not unique to him. Jesus wasn't the first to say that we should love God and love our neighbor. Rabbis had already said that before Jesus. What is unique about Jesus is that Jesus demonstrated that love with his life.

Jesus not only said that we should love our enemy; Jesus also forgave his enemies as they crucified him. Jesus not only said that he loved us; Jesus showed us that love. It's like that

tee-shirt slogan that was popular a few years ago, “I asked Jesus, ‘How much do you love me?’ And he spread out his arms wide on the cross, and he died.”

Love cost Jesus everything. And it seems to me that following Jesus in love will cost us a lot too.

Do you remember the story of the rich, young ruler? He wanted to follow Jesus. And Jesus asked the young man if he had followed the law. And the ruler replied that he had followed the law since he was just a boy.

Apparently Jesus believed him. Jesus looked at this fine young man and “loved him.” And how is the love of Jesus expressed? It is expressed by asking this young man to sacrifice. He asked him to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and then come follow him. That was how Jesus expressed his love for this young man. He asked him to radically reorder his priorities and sacrifice on behalf of his neighbor.

This is not how the average person in our country looks at sacrifice.

In the presidential debates there was a particularly telling question. The candidates were asked how the American people will need to sacrifice in order to do what we need to do as a people. Neither candidate was willing to answer that question directly. They knew that a call to sacrifice would not win an election.

Some of you remember a time when that was not true. You remember a time when gas was rationed, victory gardens were all the rage and people bought bonds to finance the war effort.

In other words there was a sense that sacrifice was necessary in order to accomplish a common goal. We might not have agreed on everything, but we knew at that time in history that we had to work together. Love of country required great sacrifice; sacrifice not only of the young men and women who went to war but also sacrifice from the American people.

In the same way Jesus teaches us that loving God means a costly love of our neighbor.

Love is not just a feeling. It is a courageous act. It is a willingness to give everything to God and our neighbor.

It is a love that comes without strings; it is a love that gives everything.

## LOVE AND THE HARD TRUTH

I think it’s important to note that Jesus’ words about loving God and loving neighbor were not spoken in the rarified area of academia. They were spoken in the middle of a controversy. The religious leaders were trying to test Jesus. They were trying to trick him into saying the wrong thing so that they could crucify him.

Jesus was very harsh in the way that he responded to these religious leaders. He not only told them that they were wrong; he told them that they were hypocrites.

Down through the years people have used these harsh words as an excuse to persecute Jewish people, people who had nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus. What people didn't understand is that these harsh words of Jesus were not meant just for the religious people of his day; they were also meant for the religious people of our day.

We are the Pharisees. We are the enemies of Jesus when we promote a cheap grace instead of the costly grace that is offered on the cross of Calvary.

But, because Jesus loves us he speaks harshly to us. Jesus looks us directly in the face and tells us that we are wrong, dead wrong. Jesus tells us to reevaluate our priorities.

We can talk about loving God and neighbor all we want. But, love is more than talk. Love is action. Love is doing something.

In Luke's version of this story, the religious leader (a lawyer) hears Jesus' answer about how loving God and neighbor are connected. And apparently he is convicted by what Jesus has to say. So in an attempt to justify himself the lawyer asks, "And exactly who is my neighbor?"

How would you answer that question? Is a neighbor someone who lives in the neighborhood? Is your neighbor a fellow Christian or a fellow American? Where do we draw the boundaries when it comes to our love of God and human beings?

Jesus didn't answer the lawyer's question directly. Instead, he told him the story of the Good Samaritan. And the essence of that story is that God's love doesn't know any boundaries, and the word neighbor is not defined by location but by need.

It has become apparent in the recent economic crisis that we truly have a world economy. What happens in India or China or Japan or the United States affects the rest of the world. We are dependent upon each other. Our actions both good and bad can have a very real effect on our brothers and sisters who live in places far away.

I would suggest that we need a method of moral judgment that goes beyond just what is good for me or good for my family or even what is good for my country. We need to ask what is good for the world because in a very real sense the world is our neighbor.

What does the Bible say? God loves the world. That's why God sent Jesus into the world, to give us that message.

And if God loves the world, maybe we should too. Of course you could argue that this kind of love is risky, demanding and more than we could ever do on our own. And you would be right about that.

But, we believe that love is a miracle.

In just a few weeks we will talk about how the word became flesh and dwelt among us. The world was not happy about this. The world rejected the very Son of God. The world crucified him.

But, the love of God in Jesus was a love that would not die. Despite all the pain and rejection the message lives on. God is love, and God calls us to love in his name.

God help all of us relearn this basic lesson, this fundamental of our faith.

Amen.

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