

## “Love of God, Neighbor ... and Self”

October 23, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005

Gates Presbyterian Church

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I Thessalonians 2:1-8 and Matthew 22:34-40

My mother’s contribution to my vocabulary is the non-word “eating-est.” The context is always the same: “It seems your congregation is always having a meal. You serve the eating-est churches!” As I sat in my office yesterday, taking in wonderful aromas from preparations for our ham dinner, it occurred to me that my mother thinks churches I serve as Pastor are eating-est because I always tell her about the meals. Apparently, my love of eating gives credence to her suspicion that all we do around here is eat. I am not going to tell her about last night’s ham dinner, the pig roast this Saturday or the meal at our Heritage Sunday a week from today. Were I to do so, her next statement would be predictable: “You serve the eating-est churches!”

To be labeled the “eating-est church” is hardly the worst description assigned to a congregation. It would be more welcoming to be labeled the missioning-est, loving-est or the fellowshiping-est or the grace-filled-est church, but in today’s climate of name-calling often done pejoratively, all of those more positive labels are more cherished. At this point in composing this sermon, my computer screen was covered with red squiggly lines under all of the words to which I added the superlative suffix –est. I realize it would be grammatically correct to call a congregation the most mission oriented or the most loving or the most courageous or even the most likely to have a good time eating and in fellowship, but I had fun making up those words. It was with chagrin that I realized some *not-so* inviting terms ending with –est are in fact words: stingiest, crabbiest, grumpiest, crankiest, and meanest.

What prompted these verbal meanderings is my reflections on our readings from Scripture this morning, the lectionary passages chosen for this date. The first words of Psalm 90 were captured in the Call to Worship and our glorious hymn “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Those words remind us of some of the labels we use to define the Almighty God: our Help, our Hope, our Shelter, our Eternal Home, and our Guard. What Jim read from Paul’s Letter to the Christians in Thessalonica spoke of how people of the early church had *courage* in the face of suffering and opposition, how they *pleased* God instead of humans, and how they *gentle* with each other, “like a nurse caring for her own children.” We are reminded that the labels courageous, pleasing and gentle are ones we Christians of this age would hope to deserve and earn.

If Psalm 90 reminds us of some of the reasons we love and honor God and Paul’s Letter reminds us of some of the means of loving and caring for others, then the Gospel Lesson ties it together, helping us to hear the commandment to love God, neighbor and self. Jesus took a decree of God found in Deuteronomy and another in Leviticus and creatively melded them to compose words as familiar as any in Scripture. Asked “which commandment in the law is the greatest,” Jesus gave a two-fold answer:

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.

Be it the “big” 10 or the other hundreds of commandments found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Jesus was convinced these two halves of one great commandment said it all. Now let us be clear! In this reading from Matthew’s Gospel, we witness another attempt by religious leaders in Jerusalem to get Jesus to say something they could use to discredit Him, to label Him a traitor with either the Romans or the Jews. The Sadducees and Pharisees had no scruples. They didn’t care with whom Jesus got in trouble, just so it was serious enough to warrant Jesus falling from grace. Last week, we heard the question posed to Jesus about whether taxes should be paid to the Emperor or not. Had Jesus said “no,” the Pharisees would have turned Him over to the Roman authorities, labeling Him a protestor of civil rule. Had Jesus said “yes,” they would have been happy for the people of Jerusalem to label Jesus a traitor to His own. After all, the Jews were tired of the Roman occupation and would have rejected anyone advocating any continued subservience to outsiders. Pointing out that the coin bore the Emperor’s face, Jesus creatively answered, “render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s.” Not only did that amaze His detractors. It made them all the more determined to label Him as a troublemaker and “get Him.”

I look forward to next week’s Heritage Sunday. My mother is correct. Part of my anticipation is the reality that there will be wonderful food! More importantly, we as a congregation will reflect on our church’s history. A group of church members has assembled a collage of photographs from our heritage including a shot of the tavern in which this congregation first gathered! But on that Reformation Sunday, we will also welcome new members into our midst and rejoice in the diversity of the ethnic backgrounds of which we are comprised.

We encourage people to come in native attire and to prepare a meal distinctive to their culture. It is intriguing how people in this country define themselves based on their ethnicity. Despite a claim and pride in being a cultural melting-pot, we often label persons as Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Spanish-Americans, Arab-Americans, Asian-Americans, even Scottish Americans and East Indian-Americans. We know persons who are a wonderful blend of many races and cultures, like Colin Powell and Tiger Woods, and the truth is that many of us are in essence a human hodge-podge. I am one-quarter Swedish and three-quarters a melding of peoples from the English Isles, mostly from a land north of Hadrian’s Wall, called Scotland.

The continued hope is that whenever we celebrate our diversity and all the labels we have adopted, we will also remember the call to be one in Christ, one in ministry and one in mission. To be labeled a Christian means we hear the commandment to love God, all our neighbors near and far, and to love ourselves as brothers and sisters in faith, each of whom is made in the image of the One God!

In the context of how we are labeled, think for a moment how often we label people in limiting and perhaps uncomplimentary ways! Humans take perfectly good words, nuance the original meaning in extreme ways and assign a capital letter to the new narrower definition. In the process, we diminish each person’s claim to full personhood – and that is hardly loving!

- The word for sharing and living the gospel is “evangelical.” Indeed, the German word for Protestant is “evangelische.” Yet, I am not an Evangelical Preacher with a capital “E” for that word, capitalized, has come to denote a person who stresses salvation in Christ as though that is the end-all. As significant as is our redemption in Christ, it is only part of the whole message of God! But the greatest tragedy is that a wonderful word is often seen in a negative light. It would be an honor to be labeled a [little e] evangelical!

- There are fundamentals to our Christian faith, eternal truths we hold as God given and self-evident, but to be labeled a Fundamentalist or a “Fundie” is critical in all too many circles!?
- There is much to learn from Scripture, from the traditions that have evolved and have been handed to us from previous generations of faithful followers of Christ. There is much of the past we as Christians seek to conserve, but no one is going to call me a [capital C] Conservative!
- Neither am I a Liberal in the way that word is often narrowly defined, but I hope all of us liberal in our love of God, neighbor and self and that we are liberal and generous in our care and concern for all people, generous in our offerings of time, talent and treasure.
- To be charismatic is to be filled with the power and love of the Holy Spirit, but we know the word [capital C] Charismatic has its own set of overtones and connotations!
- Then there is the label pacifist! One of Jesus’ beatitudes speaks of “blessed are the peacemakers,” and yet in some settings, the word Pacifist is pronounced with a sneer as though it is un-American, un-patriotic or even treasonous!

Just think how often some of those labels are tagged with less than favorable adjectives! People are called flaming or bleeding heart liberals, raging or heartless conservatives, Bible-thumping Evangelicals or Fundamentalists (as though these persons literally hit people over the head with the Book!). Those adjectives discredit perfectly legitimate labels and outlooks!

As often as we hear the words from Matthew, about loving our God with all our heart, soul and mind and as often as we recall Jesus’ assertion about loving all our neighbors, there is a phrase between the two halves of the commandment that warrants a closer look. After quoting the Deuteronomy “You shall love the LORD your God” part, Jesus says, “and a second is like it.” Jesus clearly thought the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” with its inherent expectation that one loves the Image of God implanted in ones own soul, mirrors the first part. Jesus perceived love of God, neighbor and self as part and parcel of each other. Indeed, in 1 John 4:20, we hear these words:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

Now there’s a label for you! Liar! Our faith tells us that a claim to love God is negated if we show anything less than complete love towards everyone else! I read the word “liar” in I John and hear it with the vim and vigor of the actor Charles Laughton in the role of Sir Wilfred Robarts in Billy Wilder’s 1957 production of Agatha Christie’s “Witness for the Prosecution.” In one exchange with a witness, Sir Robarts, in complete frustration, wig about to come flying off, finally bellows at the poor woman: “Were you lying then or are you lying now, ... or are you not, in fact, a chronic and habitual *liar*?”

Words and labels are powerful. Let us claim the label of persons who love God, neighbor and self in wonderful ways and do so in truth so as to not invite God considering us liars! May we lift each other up in prayer! May we, in the challenge of the anthem we now hear, be God’s loving hands to all of this wonderful world. May it be said of us that we loved then, love now and are, in fact, people who demonstrate chronic and habitual love of God, neighbor and self.

Amen.