

IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THIS

Mark 12:28-34

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October 31, 2021

TEXT: Mark 12:29-31 “The first [commandment] 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, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

PURPOSE: To call us make love of God and neighbor the real purpose for how we are and what we do as Christ’s Church.

Today’s worship is carrying a lot of freight. That’s not how we want it to be. Most of us, myself included, come here on Sunday morning to release whatever we may be carrying, not to take on more. Sunday worship should be *grace time*, time to let go and let God. It should be especially so these days, when dealing with the consequences of the pandemic have just about worn us out. Jesus was heard to say, “Come to me, anyone who is weary from carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) Yes, please, Jesus, if only for this sweet hour which calls us from a world of care. But we are the church of Jesus Christ. We bear his name and we share his life. And sharing his life involves continuing his work. So here’s the short list of stuff which today’s worship is carrying.

First of all, it is Reformation Sunday, the day celebrating the birth of the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther nailed his criticisms of the church to the door of the church in Wittenburg Germany, in 1517. Second, tomorrow is ‘All Saints Day,’ the day set aside to remember and give thanks for the saints of our lives, the people through whom God’s light shone. In a few minutes, we will have opportunity to call out the names of our personal saints, and together, to give thanks for the faithful witness of their lives. Next, you’ve already heard that we’ve got a stewardship campaign going right now. A little later in this worship, it will be our privilege to hear two of our sisters in faith share with us the impact this church is making. Today also, we are taking time to give thanks for the gift that Joyce Laporte has been to us, and to bid her farewell as she moves to Florida to live with her daughter. Have I missed anything? At least we are skipping doing anything about Halloween. Except that maybe, all of you have dressed up as scary church-goers. Oh, yes, there is this gospel word from Jesus declaring the supreme importance of loving God and neighbor. Let me see if I can check all the boxes without wearing us out.

Reformation Sunday reminds us that the church is ‘always re-formed and always re-forming’ – always being renewed internally, and always advocating for God’s ways in the world. It is one of two Sundays in the church year when we put a red cloth on our communion table and I wear a red stole. The two ‘red Sundays’ – Pentecost and Reformation Day – remind us that the Church lives by the fire of the Holy Spirit – that’s the red of Pentecost – and the blood of the martyrs – that’s the red of Reformation Day.

In the past twenty-five years, Christ's Church has undergone a re-forming on a scale not seen since the upheaval and reforming of Reformation times. The urgency of these times for churches cannot be overemphasized. Let me paraphrase some lyrics from Bob Dylan: "If you aren't busy being born, you are busy dying."¹ That's a hard but true word for the church today.

But it need not be a word which leaves us without resources. For sure, we have the witness of those followers and friends of Jesus who have come before us. Celebrating All Saints in the same worship service as Reformation Day is a wonderful way to open ourselves to the creativity and courage of our spiritual ancestors, and to commit ourselves to becoming the church Jesus needs us to be in this time and this place. This congregation has another resource for reformation. Between 2018 and 2020, Roberta Daw, Deborah Graham, Keira Rand and I participated in a conference program called "Creating and Leading the Church in the 21st Century." It's probably an understatement to say that we as a church have not sufficiently embraced the insights and practices which that program provided us. But those resources remain available to us. All we need to do is to ask our participants to bring their notes to a meeting. At the end of the program, Gayle Murphy, one of its leaders, gave each congregation a small vine. She offered it as an image of what might grow from our shared learnings. I've kept it at our house, where it has grown a whole lot since Gayle gave it. Today, as I come closer to retiring from parish ministry, I am passing it along to this congregation. Let it serve as a sign of the growth God desires for us.

All Saints Day. I want to tell you about one of my saints. John Herbster was a retired minister who became a member of my home church. After I graduated from seminary, I lived with my parents while I waited for a call to a parish. I got to know John during that time. He cut a dashing figure. He always wore a white clergy shirt and collar, which perfectly matched his shock of white hair. He had a gentleness and humility about him which I found compelling, in spite of the restlessness and impatience I had about my vocation. One day, I went to John's home and asked him what ministry had been like for him. I sat in awe as he chronicled a ministry that began during the Great Depression and continued well past what would have been his retirement age.

I finally was called to a church which was located about 25 miles from my home town. That church had been John's last settled pastorate. I remember him standing up during my installation to speak. He looked around at the people gathered there, many of whom had been his flock years before, and waved an accusing finger at them. "You be

¹Bob Dylan "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)"

nice to this young pastor, now. I know how you can be.”

Some years later, John died. His daughter, with whom he had lived for the last years of his life, invited a number of people, including myself, to take things that had been his. I found a photograph of him from when he was very young in ministry. I put that picture in the Bible I use for my daily devotions. Every once in a while, probably when the Spirit knows I need it, I run across it, and I give thanks to God for letting him be one of my saints. I’m willing to bet that most of us here can think of someone who has been some kind of a saint to you.

Our Stewardship Campaign seeking our generous support for the ministry of this church comes to its moment of commitment next Sunday. This year’s theme invites us to imagine ourselves as “Rooted in Love,” as followers of Jesus who are “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in their season.” (Psalm 1:3) Our theme is not, “we need more money,” although that is very true. Rather, our theme reminds us that it is by virtue of being nourished by God that we are able to bear the fruits of faithfulness. We come to this season of seeking financial support for our ministry not from an anxious place of scarcity, even though we live in a world defined by scarcity. We come to this season from a grateful place of abundance, because we know that the love of God is limitless, and that God’s nourishing never dries up. It is when we pay attention to the fruits, when we take time to recognize the impact this church has on our lives and the lives of others, that we are moved to give as generously as we can, and then some, because we trust that God’s abundance will provide even more than what we think we need.

And then, there’s Joyce Laporte. She joined this congregation in 2014, and has been an active part of it ever since. She served on the Executive Board. She was part of our original Capital Campaign team. She worked on the history of our buildings and their acceptance into the State Registry of Historic Places. She has represented us at Merrimack Association and New Hampshire Conference meetings. She helped to organize the reunion of the people who had been students in the schoolhouse we now call our Friendship House. Now, she’s moving to Florida to live with one of her daughters. Affirming her ministry and bidding her farewell is more like a privilege than a burden. Not only that, but we get to wish her well at a coffee hour in the Friendship House following worship this morning.

So, let’s see: calling the church to be reformed and reforming, giving thanks for our saints and taking inspiration from them, investing in the fruitfulness of our life together, and sharing best wishes to a sister in faith as she prepares to leave us. What’s

all this about, really? Are these things agenda items we need to check off, or is something else going on here?

A Jewish religious leader came to Jesus with a question: what is the most important commandment? He was very aware of all the commandments which needed to be heeded in order to be righteous before God. Tradition said there were 613 of them in what we Christians call our Old Testament. Like us with the many tasks involved in being church, he wanted some way to prioritize them, or some way to distill them. Yes, there is, Jesus responded: love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as if he or she was you. (By the way, these two commandments really are three, because the second one assumes that we love ourselves.)

It all comes down to this: it all comes down to love. The Church of Jesus Christ is the Church of Jesus Christ because it is rooted in love, in God's love for us and in our love for God, in God's plan to love the world through us, and in God's amazing grace which enables us to love ourselves, no matter how messed up our life has been. Whatever we do as participants in the Body of Christ bears fruit because it is rooted in love. The church's "re-forming" is for the sake of loving God and loving each other and loving the world God loved enough to send Jesus. Remembering the saints – the big name saints right along with our personal saints – is about connecting with their love for us and their passion for the ways of God. Financially supporting this ministry is not about paying the bills. It's about resourcing ministries which enable us to love God and love our neighbors. That famous passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13) insists that unless our faith-practice – our preaching, our service, our giving – is rooted in love, it amounts to nothing. It is of no lasting value. Loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves are not things we do, not just two of many of the things we are supposed to do because we are disciples of Jesus. Loving God and loving our neighbor and helping each other love ourselves is who we are. It is the fruit of receiving our life from the unlimited, unconditional love of God.

Maybe it looks like there's too much to be done. Yes, we have things to do as individual disciples of Jesus, and we have things to do as a congregation of his disciples. But if we realize that everything we do is rooted in love, the individual tasks become privileges, not burdens, opportunities for us to share the love with which we have been loved. That's what it all comes down to.

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