

Sermon – Sunday, October 22, 2017
The Church Shall Remain Holy - Matthew 22:34-46

Fred Rogers – well known by many as the famous television host of Mr. Rogers Neighbourhood once told this story: At the Seattle Special Olympics there were nine contestants for the 100 yard dash. They assembled at the starting line and took off at the sound to start. One little boy stumbled and fell, hurt his knee and began to cry. One little girl immediately stopped and said, If I kiss it will it make it better? A kid started crying in sympathy. Another child heard her and stopped to watch and as soon as that happened, everyone else stopped running and as a group came back and linked arms with the other kids. Together, all nine of the kids walked to the finish line, laughing and giggling with each other. Rogers recalled that the stadium went wild with cheers.

The beauty of children unencumbered by ego, remind us that a meaningful life is really simple.

The conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees in today's reading is deceptively simple. The rabbis and lawyers who were contemporaries of Jesus calculated that there were 613 laws to be known and obeyed by conscientious Jews. Of the 600 plus, 248 were positive commandments like: Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy, Honor your father and mother. Three hundred and sixty-five laws were negative prohibitions (one for each day of the year), you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet and so on. There were multiple interpretations of so many laws, keeping and observing them was a full-time job for any good Pharisee or Sadducee.

With remarkable precision and confidence, Jesus reduces a complex and almost impossible system to two by embracing a passage from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy: Love the Lord your God with heart, soul, mind, strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the heart of both the Jewish tradition and because Jesus speaks of it as the Great Commandment, the heart of the Christian tradition as well.

We could boil things down just a little further, regarding this thing called love; Love God and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus did not give priority to one law over the other, he sees the two as one, as branches bursting from the same tree.

So let's start at the beginning. The text takes it for granted that we love ourselves. This is often harder than we want it to be, but it is also easy for us to get caught up in modern anxieties concerning self-esteem and self-respect, self-love and self-care. I recently saw an article entitled: How do I love me? Let me count the ways. Our modern temptation is to work toward our own self-fulfillment and individual happiness and leave it at that.

If we lose sight of the other and the needs of others, we risk becoming noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. For those of us who follow the spiritual path, our daily work is the discipline of bringing into balance the love of self and others to our lives. There are dangers in both

directions: if we spend too much time on ourselves and our own interests, we run the risk of selfishness, but if we forget the self and think only of others, we risk losing ourselves in the needs of others.

The Great Commandment is a call to profound unity of heart, mind, body and spirit. God, God's people and we ourselves are made a part of this thing called love. Henri Nouwen wrote in *The Diary of His Final Year* that it all comes together as one, we become a part of the all-embracing divine love of God made visible in our daily lives with each other. When we direct our whole being toward God, we discover our neighbor and ourselves right there in the heart of God.

Who then, is our neighbor? Parkminster's ministry and mission has long practiced finding that out right here in this place and in our wider community.

Our neighbour is from the LGBTQ community who attended last night's potluck and found friendship and welcome. Our neighbor is a First Nations person seeking reparations and reconciliation. Our neighbor is a homeless young woman with the potential for a GED and the desire to study. Our neighbor is a young student trying to meet the demands of university and being away from home. Our neighbor is living in Kenya and walking 13 miles a day to get water. And our neighbour is even the one who spray painted the words on our walkway in front of the church doors.

In a busy, doing congregation that is committed to service like ours, this might be an easy enough message to hear. But this past week also showed us the grace that comes when we are vulnerable and discover the love of neighbours we never even knew existed. This outpouring of love, support and solidarity came to us in person, by telephone and in emails. From local churches, colleagues, neighbours and strangers near and far. This thing called love soothed the sadness, the anger, the shock. This thing called love was shared by social media posts – in views to the 20,000+ and in words so poignant. Someone in our local community commented on our Facebook post about the vandalism saying: "This church is by my house. I am not religious, but have the utmost respect for this congregation and what they do for the community." And another: "When I drive by this church I see the flag, I see the church and I see hope, I see a future. Thank you Parkminster for being a leader in change and acceptance"

In times such as these, and in a week like the one past, it is a good time to be talking about being neighbors and friends in each other's lives and in the world. I don't feel happy about what is happening in the world around us all the time, but I celebrate the wellspring of the joy of living together in community. In times like these, we may be tempted to pull in and protect ourselves, but the Gospel reminds us that we must never pull in so far as to forget to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. For this rule to live by, I am incredibly grateful.

The heart of ministry, the heart of being a follower of Jesus, is that love. And it's a radical kind of love and commitment. It's not an easy kind of love. It's not about sitting around with those who think the same way we do, it's about engaging with those who think differently, and listening thoughtfully and offering our views respectfully, and caring for them and allowing ourselves to be cared for in the midst of it all.

When we get beyond egos and superficial labels, it's really that simple. In a way, we are like those children. We start out together and if one falls, another will stop and tend to the scratched knee or the bumped elbow. Another will sit down and see how we are coming along. Maybe someone else will find a Band-Aid and another bring some water to refresh the spirit. Sooner or later, everyone gets to be together as we come to the end, with each other, upholding each other in the power of community and the presence of God. No one, not even the least of these will be forgotten or ignored. As Frederick Buechner has written, humanity is like a giant spider web. Touch it anywhere and the whole thing trembles.

So let us live with this awareness of our fragility and interconnectedness. When we act in the simplicity of love we can rest assured that the church shall remain holy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.