

“Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 22, 2020

4th Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

Mark 12:28-34

One Sunday while I was in Seminary, I served as the guest preacher at a small church in downtown Louisville. That winter morning, I woke up to a blanket of about 3 inches of snow; not much to speak of around these parts, but a pretty big deal down south. When I arrived at the church for worship, there were no other cars in the parking lot, only a shovel next to the front steps; so I got out and cleared the steps. Just as I was finishing, the organist arrived, unlocked the door and we went inside. Eventually, we were joined by two others and so, together, we worshipped – leaning on the truth that whenever two or more gather, God will be present.

Today, we are one shy of that total here in our sanctuary, but – as each of us must do – we are connecting in a different way; gathering in heart, soul, and mind, even while we practice social distancing of our bodies. In this way, we are called into the core of this text; loving our neighbors as ourselves, seeking to protect others by limiting in-person contacts and the resultant risk of spreading this contagion. As always, our strength lies in our unity as the body of Christ, even if – for this moment – we are not able to safely share the same space.

In ancient days, identity was strictly communal; and so, being separated from or cast out of a community would have created a crisis of identity. In our modern, individualistic society – on the other hand – we seek to find or create our own identities. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. The early Christians, as with the Jewish sects they evolved from, would always have had the question on their minds, “am I faithful to my community?”

Thus, when a scribe comes forward to ask Jesus about what he considered the greatest commandment, this interpreter of the Jewish law sought to represent his community well. He is unlike those others who questioned Jesus, who tried to test or entrap him. This one seems to have genuinely desired to discuss – Rabbi to Rabbi – how to best follow God’s commands.

Jesus answered that the core of our identity is love for God, self, and others. Jesus’ words challenge us to learn to embrace love in all three dimensions: first, to

love God with all we have and all we are – heart, soul, mind, and strength – second, to exercise practices that promote a healthy love of self; and third, to love your neighbors – those who are outside your family – in the same way as you love your own. Love is therefore less a feeling and more a decision to act for the good of God, self, and other as you are being faithful to your community.¹

These are not new commands; they have deep roots in the Jewish scriptures; and so the scribe sees no reason to argue with Jesus, but adds an important note of agreement: saying, “this is much more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.” In other words, the rituals that were such a part of the Jewish tradition necessarily took a backseat to the three-pronged command to love. Those other things – offerings and sacrifices – were not the most essential elements to their identity; they are not what makes a community.

Today, we are also being asked to let go of some rituals for the primary communal goal of loving God, ourselves, and our neighbors. Whether singing and praying together, passing the peace, or sharing a cup of coffee, these face-to-face interactions have temporarily been put on hold. Our liturgy – the way we do public confession, present our offerings, and enact the Holy Meal – must, for the time being, be transformed for the sake of the public good. Doing so may make us sad, or uncomfortable, because we have learned to rely on rituals to give structure and order to our lives. These may seem like sacrifices, but – as this conversation between Jesus and the scribe reminds us – they are, considering the circumstances, not the most important things.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, himself lived through one of the Great Plagues of the 16th century, and – in a letter of encouragement to a fellow pastor – offered advice about how to best help one another in the midst of a dangerous contagion; how running away from or denying a crisis is not the proper Christian response. Instead, we must lean into it, acknowledging the challenge it presents, while discerning the possibilities for self-sacrificial love that it might p. Luther said:

We help one another because 1) we know that helping our neighbors means that we are doing deeds that are pleasing to God. In fact, we do God’s will and render true and obedient service to God when we engage in helping neighbors; and 2) we know that God promises to protect and be with those who take care of their neighbors. “Godliness is of value in every way, and it holds promise both for

¹ Ronald Allen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

the present and for the life to come” the Apostle Paul wrote; and what is godliness if not serve to God, which is in fact service to our neighbor?²

Even a crisis does not remove our call as Christians to serve God and love others. If we have the skills and abilities to help those who are in distress, we must. This means that some of us will need to continue finding ways to feed the hungry, to care for those who are poor or who are isolated; if and when we can find ways to do so that don't put us or others unnecessarily at risk of catching or spreading illness.

It also means that some of us are called to continue doing our jobs – to deliver food to stores or stock it on the shelves; or to keep working in hospitals or care facilities – even if that entails a degree of risk. This is a call to the kind of heroism that people in our community, and some of you and your loved ones, are now doing.

And yet, godliness – according to Luther – has multiple meanings. If it is not for the purpose of saving life – such as making sure there is food for hungry people or medicine for the sick – then we must do all we can to save our lives and the lives of others. Right now, for us, that means regular hand-washing and social isolation as much as possible. Then, as now, loving ourselves is part of how we love others, for the same rituals and interactions that place our own health at risk also put our neighbors' health in danger.³

Maybe, in this period of time where we must put aside some of our rituals and traditions, we will discover new ones that help us to practice love of God, self, and neighbor. Maybe you have become more intentional about checking in with extended family members and neighbors; or maybe you have concentrated more on your own personal health and rest. Or, maybe being at home has prompted you to embrace some new form of social media technology to help you stay better connected or informed. Or, maybe you have been inspired to join a letter campaign, or to support one of your struggling local businesses, or to find something in your closet that you can give away to help someone in need.

Are there ways that you have witnessed others loving their neighbors in new ways this week? As you slow down or decrease your in-person activities, you might realize that there are other ways to impact the lives of others. Have you, yourself, felt called to love in new ways this week? To experience the love of God

² Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague” translated by John Valentine

³ Micah Royal from *Narrative Lectionary*

through natural beauty; to rediscover the power of solitude or meditation; to pray with thanksgiving for those blessings we have received, and to plead for mercy on those who are ill or stand in harm's way?

Today, when so many are hurting, so many are fearful, so many are trying to navigate a new way of being in community as we remain physically separated, may we hear Christ' call no to let this challenge destroy us but instead invite us to transform, to be made new; and to put the command to love God, self, and each other first. Amen.