

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent II, February 17, 2008, dedicated to Moderator Tom Stewart and the newly elected and installed leaders of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, and always to the Glory of God!

“What are the Key Teachings in the Bible?”

Micah 6:6-8, John 3:1-16

Part III of VIII in the Lenten sermon series:

“Questions My Father Asked Me”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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My father asked me four questions, which I somewhat combine into one today: *“If you were to catalogue the important teachings from the Bible, what would they be? Do these teachings form guidelines for building worthwhile, meaningful fulfilling lives?”* The second question is: *“What are the ‘Keys to the Kingdom’ for our daily lives? What guidelines do the Gospels and the Bible give us for a healthy, worthwhile and fulfilling life?”*

I have not provided a catalogue of important teachings from the Bible. However, you should all have a sheet this morning with “Key teachings in the Bible” and “How to Use the Bible.” I will reflect on the 11 passages listed.

My grandfather, Hugo Kellermeyer, was a preacher and a teacher of God’s Holy Word for more than 40 years. Recently, my Uncle David Kellermeyer presented me with Granddaddy’s 1901 Bible. In the inside cover was this list of passages, which I have reprinted and distributed for all of you. In the list there are more than 30

passages suggested for you to deal with the joys and challenges of daily living. I hope you read these and see how they might apply to your life.

While these teachings are not a complete catalogue, I do think they will provide reflective support for you in your daily life. An even better way to use the Bible for guidance is to read it daily. I have found that women's or men's or teen or youth study Bibles are helpful tools for delving into the texts - with an important caveat. Most often these Bibles are the products of conservative theological and biblical organizations and may become judgmental in ways that sneak up on you - especially in relation to sexual orientation issues and interpretation of sin, salvation and who is and who is not going to heaven.

As to the "Keys to the Kingdom," I would like to do an entire sermon series on these keys, which I believe include: Forgiveness, Salvation, Liberation, Prayer, Justice, Mercy, Humility and Love. In reflecting on the eleven passages today, some of these themes emerge.

What is the Bible? It is a complex collection of 66 "books" compiled over more than 4,000 years. Some of these are history, some poetry, some revelation, some prophecy, some law and much, much more. For more than a thousand chapters and more than 10 thousand passages of scripture, the Bible addresses a huge range of issues, which can range from practical to mysterious to miraculous to poetic to legal to prayerful - all which are built upon the promises of God for daily and eternal life.

Beginning with nothingness, a vast Universe is formed and the intricacies of creation come into being. Through the creation of humanity in Adam and Eve, through their banishment from the Garden of Eden and establishment on the land, to Abraham's wandering search for home, Israel's slavery, liberation from Egypt, desert wandering and finally return to the land, to establishment of

a nation-state, separation, destruction and exile, to return (again) to reestablishment in the land, the story of Hebrew scripture is told in poetry, prophecy, historical drama and 613 laws - God is at work through God's people!

The Christian scriptures tell us the story of Jesus the Christ. With the coming of the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ - his birth, his life of teaching, preaching, healing, death on the cross, time in the grave and resurrection from the dead, Jesus emerges as the Savior of humanity. His story is lived out by the church in the rest of Christian scriptures through story telling, theological teaching, letters and finally in the apocalyptic Revelation of John.

I have chosen 11 verses to reflect upon as key teachings of this immense universe of God's truth and promise.

I will do so walking through these verses: Exodus 20:1-17 - The Ten Commandments; Psalm 23 - The Lord is My Shepherd; Psalm 46 - God is our refuge and strength; Micah 6:6-8 - Do Justice, Love Tenderly and walk humbly with God; Matthew chapters 5-7 - The Sermon on the Mount; Matthew 22: 37-40 - The Two Greatest Commandments; Luke 4:16-21 - The Spirit of the Lord in upon me . . .; Luke 24:13-35 - The Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus; John 3:1-16 - To be born from above; Romans 8:31-39 - Christ is all in all; Romans 12 - the guidelines for living a Christian life; I Corinthians 13 - The Greatest gift is Love. With so many key teachings, I must be brief . . .

Exodus 20:1-17 is God's gift of Ten Commandments for humanity. God gives the law to Moses as a way to structure society, ethics and moral codes. Martin Luther referred to these Ten Commandments as the greatest gift of God's Grace. Later, he called the Beatitudes the greatest gift of God's Law to Love. Usually, we see the opposite interpretation. But, Luther believed God's Law to be Grace and God's Grace to Law. Interestingly, Moses receives the

tablets of God's laws on the mountaintop of Sinai and when he brings them down to the people, they are already sinning boldly. He smashes God's chiseled word and they become shards of grace, fragments of truth. God never speaks of this act by Moses. God's silence is so fascinating, it would take at least another sermon to unpack.

In **Psalm 23**, I find the greatest comfort for people in their walk with God - the good shepherd who is there through thick and thin. I also find this to be text with which people run hot and cold. Some of you feel moved to have it read at memorial services for loved ones. Others feel it is over used and under-heeded. I find it to be poetry and compassion bound together in a beautiful, pastoral way.

In **Psalm 46**, we find the power and grandeur and God at work, but we also experience the intimacy and comforting presence of God. God is our refuge and strength - a very present help in times of trouble. The heart of God speaking from the depths of the sea is almighty and all-powerful but also close and nearby. I think of the hymns, "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise. In Light, inaccessible, hid from our eyes" coupled with "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me." Can you see why this passage makes it to the top of the list?

Each week when we gather, the only passage of scripture which abides with us continuously is **Micah 6:8**, which is the closing sentence of our Open And Affirming statement. The prophet asks: "*What does the Lord require but to do justice, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God.*" This is the passage with which I was ordained. This is the passage I count as the measure of faith. Am I a person who DOES justice? I don't mean talking about it. I mean "doing" what is just and what is right? Are you a person who does justice? Are you one who loves tenderly or one who walks in steadfast love with others? And finally, do you do so with a humble heart? I find people who really DO JUSTICE are often those not on the front,

in the papers and those who are called champions of peace of justice. They are humble servants of God who day in and day out do the right thing. These humble servants of the Lord are often unrecognized and unrecognizable to themselves. In the words of the Nike commercials, they “JUST DO IT!” - and the “It” they do is Justice! My friend Rabbi Howard Apothaker of Temple Beth Shalom and current co-President of BREAD, once did a teaching on Micah 6:8 for pastors and rabbis. He said the irony of this prophetic passage is that “If” you live this way and do so with humility, your work for justice may never be known until after you are dead. Because your loving humility in your walk with God means, you never speak about that which you do. This is my favorite passage, Dad!

Matthew 5-7 is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus lays out the important parables, teachings and guides for faithful living. He begins with the Beatitudes in Mt. 5:1-12. There are no more beautiful words in scripture than these words, which guide our faith. In the early church, the Beatitudes was the Covenant Statement of the church. In other words, if you wanted to be a Christian, you had to speak the words of the Beatitudes and live into them! I believe, I could spend an entire year of these three chapters of scripture, which deal with marriage, divorce, love, faithfulness and how to treat your neighbor. The Lord’s Prayer is contained herein. So much happens in these three chapters, volumes and volumes of books have been written on them. Clearly, these are key passages of faith!

On to Matthew, we find my father’s favorite passage in the Gospels. Last night on the phone he said, “*Don’t forget the two most important commandments!*” I asked, “Do you mean **Matthew 22:35-40**?” He responded, “Yes! ...if that is *‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself!’*” I said, “It is!” I would agree. When Jesus boils down the 613 laws of the Old Testament to one from Leviticus and one from Deuteronomy,

he is saying, “If you get this, you are walking in the path of God!” Loving God with everything that is in us! Loving ourselves enough that we can love our neighbors! That’s what Jesus is talking about! As we can see from other passages coming up as well, love has everything to do with it!

Luke 4:16-21 is the powerful text in which Jesus declares, “THIS IS WHY I AM HERE!” Reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus lays it out in his hometown synagogue. People react (as people will always react to Jesus) in two distinct ways. First, they love him! They say, “Here is Joseph’s boy! Isn’t he wonderful?” Then, when they realize the radical call he is issuing for revival, renewal, repentance and change, they drive him out of town intending to kill him! This passage has been the second guiding principle of my ministry (beside Micah 6:8). It calls for the Jubilee year. It calls for social transformation and justice for all! Again, if we follow this way of healing, preaching, teaching and living God’s Word - the WORLD will be healed!

I have chosen **Luke 24:13-35** as one of the New Testament’s most powerful stories. Combined with that, it is the greatest Resurrection story in the Gospels (except maybe John 21). The Risen Savior walks and talks with disciples who are overwhelmed with grief and loss. They do not recognize him as they move down the road to Emmaus. Finally, he reveals himself as the Risen Christ in the breaking of the bread. The power of the story comes in the way he is present to them in teaching, listening and breaking bread. Many Christians have taken the Emmaus walk as a spiritual discipline. They have come to know the revelation of Christ in their lives through this story and the faith it engenders.

Our Gospel text today from **John 3:1-16** is also one of my favorites. John 3:16 is often called “the gospel in a nutshell.” *“God so loved THE WORLD that God gave the only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

Remember that God's love is for the world, not the church. God is madly in love with the whole world. It is for the entire global community and all creatures great and small that God gave all of us God's Son! For the salvation of creation - Jesus. For the protection of all life - Jesus. For the forsaken, forgotten and frail - Jesus. For Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and all others - Jesus is the gift. This is not an oppressive gift or a gift that judges, but rather the incarnation of God's love. In him, life and (yes) eternal life is offered and given.

In Romans, we have many great verses. I have lifted up **Romans 8:31-39** and **Romans 12**. In the first passage, Paul tells us that nothing in all creation can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Romans 12 (my Dad's other favorite passage), we discover what living a Christian life is all about. Paul does an amazing job of laying out the guidelines for living in the love of Christ. I have preached many sermons on both passages - again among the key passages in all of scripture.

I Corinthians 13 - Finally, speaking to the church in Corinth, Paul has a lot to say about spiritual gifts, about the organizational structure of the church, about authority in the church and about how a community can come together in Christ. The Corinthians are a very difficult church with which to deal. People celebrate communion whenever they like and however they like. They don't take each other seriously. They are not a team. They are self-centered and unruly. By the end of the letter, Paul has said much about faith, hope and love. But, in the 13th Chapter, he brings it all home. He says what our faith should really be about. It should be about LOVE.

My great-uncle, The Rev. Dr. Willis Mathias once told me he preached on I Corinthians whenever he left a pastorate. He left two congregations in 42 years. His first church was in Dayton, Ohio.

He served there two years. When he came to Allentown, Pa., he came to stay. For 40 years he served the church in Allentown. I visited him there with my parents on many occasions. I adored my Uncle Willis. He was a soft-spoken, gentle, humble man. He was also a union-organizer and a social justice preacher. He was, in my mind, the embodiment of Micah 6:8. At his funeral, I Corinthians 13 was the basis for the service. He was a beloved pastor and friend to many and lived the fullness of God's love in Jesus Christ.

When we consider the key passages of scripture, we must always return to those which speak of love. When it all boils down to it, our faith is based on love. Paul says, *"If we speak in the tongues of mortal and angels, but have not love, we are nothing."* Let us be everything in the eyes of God. Let us be those who love one another. Amen.