

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Why Love Your Neighbor?”

Exodus 33:1-7, Romans 13:8-14; Mt. 18:15-20,

Mk 12:28-34

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By Rev. Tim Ahrens

Senior Minister

A Communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio Pentecost 13, September 7, 2014, in thanksgiving for Dr. John Siddall and in memory of Marjorie Smith who died and entered eternal life on September 5th and always to the glory of God!

“Why Love Your Neighbor?”

Exodus 33:1-7, Romans 13:8-14; Mt. 18:15-20, Mk 12:28-34

Welcome back! On a morning when many in Columbus are in mourning over the precipitous late night fall of our beloved Buckeyes from the Tree of Football Life, you are here to glorify God and grow in your love of God and your neighbor.

We are here to celebrate our life together! Our choirs have returned and our Adult Choir is singing! Our education hour is back in full swing! And we have adult tricycles to ride and bouncy houses to bounce in and the best of Columbus' winds to listen to after worship. Fun, food and fellowship await us...Does it get any better than this?

But first, the word of God preached and the body and blood of Christ received await us. Two questions issued through the ages challenge us: “Who is my neighbor? Why should I love my neighbor?”

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

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In Jesus' teachings, our relationship with our fellow women, men and children is inseparablefrom our relationship with God. To Love God and love our neighbors (as ourselves) are two aspects of the same calling. Jesus says in John 13:34-35: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

In Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospel, the imperative to love our neighbor is in story form. In each Gospel, Jesus is well into his ministry of teaching, healing, prophesying when the question arises about which of the 613 Laws of Moses is the most important. Those pushing him are not the "people in the pews" who love this guy beyond measure. The regular folks – Jews and Gentiles – seem happy with his well-rounded approach of storytelling, water walking, miracle making – such as raising the dead, feeding thousands at one time, and healing those with long term afflictions. In other words – loving God and everyone else!

But, the Pharisees are the Grillers of the Law. It is their job to grill this carpenter, this “so-called” teacher of the law. They are scholars of the law. They are legal experts. In the game of Legal Jeopardy, they are the grand champions. No one knows Bible trivia better than these guys.

While we often seek to make them out as the “bad boys” of the First Century (always dressed in black with mean looks and big black headgear), they are more like “know-it-alls” than bad guys. For the most part, they are well meaning men. They want to figure out if this Jesus is the real deal because he is going around changing the rules of their ancient game – and he does it with such joyful ease.

Is he the one everyone has been waiting for? Is he the Messiah? **That is a HUGE Question.** And so they pepper him with tricky questions to try and sort out truth and its consequences.

Is it clear that when Jesus is being challenged with the question about “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” this is a genuine question?

In the oldest of the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark (12:28-34, CEV), Jesus answers like this: “*The most important law is **Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord,**³⁰ and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*³¹ The second is this, *You will*

love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

The legal expert said to him: *“Well said, Teacher. You have truthfully said that God is one and there is no other besides him.³³ And to love God with all of the heart, a full understanding, and all of one’s strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings and sacrifices.”*

When Jesus saw that he had answered with wisdom, he said to him, *“You aren’t far from God’s kingdom.”* After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. Jesus nails his challengers with the perfect answer. He wins “Final Jeopardy.” Game over.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus points out that ALL of the Law and the prophets depend on the truth of these two laws – Love God, Love self and neighbor. The truth is – you can’t love yourself or your neighbor if you don’t love God. The so simple answer to the question: “Why should I love my neighbor?” is this: “Love your neighbor because you love God.”

Through the ages, the men, women, and children who live love of their neighbor are the men, women, and children who love God. It’s that simple. If you hate God (and/or yourself), you can’t love your neighbor. I would go a bit further... if you are equivocal in your love of God, you will be equivocal in your

love of self/neighbor. Your equivocation will create a stunting of growth in love of neighbor. It is inevitable.

Luke's Gospel takes this one step further. In Luke 10:25-37, when Jesus is questioned about the love of neighbor and he answers as clearly as he does in Mark and Matthew, he is challenged again by the question – "Who is my neighbor?" He answers with a story – the story of the Good Samaritan. In the end, hero of this story is an outcast and often vilified "neighbor." If the story were being told today on the Jericho Road in the State of Israel, Jesus would have said the one who saved the beaten Jewish businessman was not just a Palestinian – but a member of Hamas. The Good Samaritan is (in reality) a most wanted enemy.

Jesus has a way of turning our world upside down. He forces us to not only love our neighbor – but to love our enemy. Who is it that we can't stand going to church with? Who is it that we never thought of inviting to our bouncyhouse today? Who is it that we come here to get away from one day a week? Who is it that we detest and who pushes every one of our buttons? Who is it that drives us crazy – literally and figuratively?

12 years ago tomorrow, September 8, 2002, this congregation voted to become an Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ. We celebrate this

momentous date every Sunday in our bulletin, when we print our Open and Affirming Statement.

We took the time from September, 2001 to May 2002 to “study” and wrestle with questions about what it really means to love our neighbor (the ones we had NEVER invited to church), we stopped our studying and took one month to pray. We created a curriculum which essentially looked at questions of who is my neighbor. We looked at racism, gender inequality, social and economic inequality, religious and theological differences and our vast range of national and ethnic similarities and differences. We spend time learning about physical and mental disabilities and we even explored whether God was a Republican or a Democrat. It turns out God is an Independent. I am sure all the Independents will go home and polish their halos this afternoon!

But, the question and caused the deepest prayer and study surrounded the extravagant welcome of Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender persons. When I preached about this in the fall of 2001 and the winter and spring of 2002, many people came to me in tears and said they had never been affirmed as a Gay Christian in the church in their lifetime. For them, to be Gay was to be outcast in relation to the church. One member kissed me and said, “I have never heard a kind word from a straight preacher in my life.”

When we finished our study, we spent 30 days in prayer – following the example of the early church in Acts. We were silent. No more preaching or teaching. We called upon the Holy Spirit to guide our next steps. Should we vote on this? Should we make a statement about who we are and who we believe God is calling us to be? In June, we met and as a congregation decided to write a statement upon which we could vote in the fall. There was one condition I asked for in the writing of the statement. I asked that no one who had shaped the educational process and no pastor of this church would end up writing our ONA statement. So – an independent committee set to work drafting a statement.

One day that summer, I was making coffee in the little kitchenette between the Large Conference Room and the Parlor when Dr. John Siddall walked in. He asked if I had a moment to look at something. I said “of course.” On a folded up, hand-written piece of paper, John had penned what is mostly the ONA statement that continues to guide us day-in and day-out. I remember sitting down, unfolding his paper, reading his words and weeping.

I asked John where these inspired words came from. He responded, “Jesus told us to love our neighbor. I thought of all the neighbors we have close by and far away, and I put this together.”

John Siddall, a retired Children's Hospital Anesthesiologist had awakened in the night and written what was in his heart. He had crafted for all time words of faith that inspire and call each of us to be good neighbors. On March 24, 2014, our friend, John Siddall entered eternal life. He is held in blessed memory by many people for many good deeds and loving acts, but I will always be grateful for my friend who shaped the future of this congregation when the Holy Spirit laid these words upon his heart. Thanks be to God for John Siddall, lover of all God's children and creatures great and small.

So, as we turn to the table of love and grace, the table we are told to approach with a reconciled and open heart, the question remains: why should we love our neighbors? First, because God loves us. Second, because we love God. Third, because Jesus told us it was the most important commandment and to just do it... no matter how it makes us squirm. Fourth, we love our neighbor because it is the right thing to do. Blessings as you go forth to love your neighbor. Amen.

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