

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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*“What Really Matters: LOVE  
God, Neighbor and Self”  
Matthew 22:37-39  
Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24;  
Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew  
25:31-46*

November 23, 2014

By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Reign of Christ Sunday, Pentecost 25, November 23, 2014, dedicated to Lucas on his baptismal day, Pam Welsh-Huggins in thanks for all she has done for so many for so long, to Tom and Kathy Brownfield our 2014 Lay Leadership Award Winners and always to the glory of God!

*“What Really Matters: LOVE God, Neighbor and Self”*

*Matthew 22:37-39*

*Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46*

*(Part II of II in the sermon series – “Foundational Texts”)*

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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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She was called “the woman of the city” (Luke 7:37). As soon as she entered the room and saw him, tears began to fall. He looked at her and the look in his eyes was saying, *“It’s okay. You are okay.”* She had not loved herself in a long, long time. Her actions and behaviors in life had cast her to the side of city streets. Now, she was on a mission of wholeness – to make herself whole again. And he was on a mission of wholeness – to make God’s people whole again. Their lives would connect as she washed his feet and he cleansed her soul. His name was Jesus and to this day we only know her as “the sinful woman.”

Jesus knew that God’s people were well versed in “holiness.” But somewhere along the way they had lost touch with wholeness. So Jesus, with a heart of compassion and healing hands and a presence which communicated Love, received the woman as she knelt to wash his feet.

Jesus was in the home of Simon the Pharisee for dinner that night. Simon was a good and righteous man – a Pharisee of the Law, He was a man who lived faithfully by the 613 laws of Moses. Jesus abided as well as possible, with 611 of those laws. But, he was really only wrapped-up and fully committed to two of them. This made him unpopular with people wrapped up with all 613 laws.

The first law that Jesus loved was the centerpiece of Jewish faith – coming from the Great Shema – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Dt. 6:4-5). The second was also key to the Jewish faith – “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). While it was a rabbinic tradition to offer summaries of the Torah, the combination of the command to love God and love neighbor was unique to Jesus. No one had put them together before – not until the rabbi from Nazareth made this connection.

Simon was thrown off by the sinful woman in his house - washing the feet of Jesus. Simon was a well known religious leader. She was a well known sinner. A woman of such ill repute was not permitted in the home of a man with such distinguished roots. She was breaking at least ten laws (my guess is a lot more) simply by coming into his home uninvited and unannounced.

Meanwhile, Simon’s invited guest, Jesus of Nazareth did not care about those laws. He only cared about her wholeness. He only cared about making her well again. He also cared about Simon and Simon’s wholeness. He wanted Simon to practice compassion before judgment; love before judgment, everything – before judgment. So here they were – Sinner, Simon and Savior.

When the shocked Pharisee began to question his loose guest and the looser woman at his feet, Jesus told a story. He always told stories when Scribes and Pharisees questioned his techniques and ways of compassion. His life narrative was based in only two laws – love God and love neighbor – so he could weave thousands of stories all day long around these foundational laws. Simplicity and clarity of love for God and neighbor will do that to a person!

When all was settled, the way of compassion trumped the way of holiness. Moreover, the politics of compassion redrew the district lines on the map around the politics of holiness. The woman of the city, born and raised on the wrong side of the tracks, who had crossed the line in her desire to become whole was embraced and sent on her way with these words, *“Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Your faith has made you whole. Go in peace.”*

Do you see? Jesus is all about making us whole.

He doesn't want us to see each Sunday as “Be Nice to God Day.” We shouldn't be here to be nice to Jesus, either. Rather, we are called to love God and our neighbor with every ounce of love that is in us – with all our heart, mind, and soul (Luke adds - and all our strength). This is hard to do, especially when we are constantly being conditioned to look out for #1 and only take care of me, myself and my own.”

In case you haven't noticed, we are living in a world where love of God and neighbor has been seemingly crushed by excess, greed and narcissistic love (which is not really love at all).

Matthew 25 speaks to this – a world divided – between those who see and respond to their neighbor in need and those who don't; those who love God and those who love neighbor – and those who don't.

In a compassionate speech on Thursday night, President Barack Obama appealed to all Americans to love our neighbors and welcome those who are new Americans - recent immigrants to our land. He was immediately met with another round of criticism. We definitely saw that coming. The critics didn't present solutions, only vitriol.

I couldn't help but think of Otto Schultz, a member of my last congregation. Otto had stowed-away on a ship from Germany in the 1930's. He had no passport, no visa, no English, and had no idea where he would go and what he would do when he landed in America. He only knew he needed to escape Hitler and the rising Nazi regime. He only knew he could not fight for National Socialism and be told to persecute his Jewish neighbors. He slept under stairways and ate garbage until a German baker asked him if he could bake. He said "yes." He meant "no." But, soon he had a trade, a place to lay his head and a land to call

home. No one loved America more than Otto Schultz. Now, our Otto Schultz's come from Mexico and Central American and their names are Juan and Maria. But, their stories are the same. They want to be citizens. They want to call America home. They don't want to be deported.

We are their neighbors. How do we love them? In Columbus, BREAD has made the case to closed ears in City Hall and the Police and Sheriff's Department that we need to extend the Matrícula Consular – an ID card more secure than a Mexican passport. While 800 communities across the nation having established this ID, Columbus refuses to pass a city ordinance to accept the Matrícula Consular as a form of ID for Mexican nationals. It is doable. It is legal.

Instead, our neighbors who want to be full citizens—now more than 40,000 people in our 1.5 million person community – hide in the shadows and sleep under steps like Otto so many generations before. Excuses are made, but the facts remain – we are not welcoming our neighbors.

Two blocks south on Broad from City Hall, Ohio Supreme Court Justice Paul Pfeifer, yet another Republican coming out for Gay Marriage, spoke recently about his daughter Lisa and her 9 and 5 year old children – his grandchildren. He said that the time has come to recognize Lisa and Rachel – her life partner and parents of the children. So, who is my neighbor? Lisa and Rachel and

their son and daughter are my neighbors. Justice Pfeifer and his wife are my neighbors.

In the spirit of our Pilgrim forbearers and their first Thanksgiving in 1621, I invite us to be good neighbors where we live and when we eat this week. As we step to our Thanksgiving tables in four days, I encourage everyone to invite someone new to your table for Thanksgiving or if you are not able to do that, at least leave an empty seat at the table – a seat which stands for all your neighbors, friends and family who are not able to be with you this Thanksgiving. And if you find yourself alone this Thanksgiving, you are invited to our sister congregation – North Congregational Church, 2040 West Henderson Road – who will host a Community Thanksgiving dinner at 12 noon. Their theme is “no one eats alone.”

Jesus was clear about compassion. He was clear that God established Love as our primary guide in life. While others around him wanted to talk about 613 laws of Moses, he was focused on two. I implore you to do the math of compassion. Turn 613 into 2. If you can love God, and your neighbor as yourself, you will fulfill the fullness of compassion. It has been done. It can be done. We can do this. Amen.

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