

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, November 8, 2009 based on Mark 12:28-32

Love Really!

Dr. Fred Craddock, a retired theologian and preacher, writes: "There once was an old man whose only close friend was his dog. The love between them had deepened through the years. Now both had begun to feel the pain and burden of age. The dog, twelve years old, could hardly walk and was covered with an irritating rash. The old man lifted the dog into his arms and carried it to the car where it lay on the seat beside him on the way to see the veterinarian. From the parking lot the old man carried the dog gently inside. "Can I help you?" asked the veterinarian.

The old man, still holding his dog, said, "First, I must ask you a question. Do you love animals above everything else?"

"Well, I love God first. Jesus says in Mark 12:30, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' And of course a second command is to love thy neighbor as oneself. We must put these things first, and then we can think about the animals."

"Then I must go elsewhere," said the old man as he moved toward the door.

"Why? What is wrong?"

"This dog is my friend," explained the old man, "and I feel I can trust him only to the care of a veterinarian who is a Christian."

What is your definition of a Christian? How would you define one? Mahatma Gandhi is reported to have said that "If Christians would really

live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today." The 19th century preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, is quoted to have said, "If a man cannot be a Christian in the place where he is, he cannot be a Christian anywhere." An anonymous saying goes, "Christian names are everywhere; Christian people are very rare." What is your definition of a Christian?

Early in my ministry, I was serving a church in a small town that was several blocks from the downtown shopping area. The town was so small that the shopping area was only about 2 blocks long. So one afternoon during confirmation class, I sent the kids downtown to conduct a sidewalk survey. I told them to tell people they were in confirmation class and that they were taking a survey that had only one question. The only question was "What is a Christian?"

I was surprised at the answers they reported. They interviewed about 20 people. The majority said that a Christian "is someone who goes to church." The next highest answer was, "A Christian is someone who obeys the 10 commandments." – a good answer but not exclusive to Christianity.) A few respondents said, "A Christian is someone who worships God." No one said, interestingly, "A Christian is someone who accepts Jesus Christ as their Savior." I found that interesting because being asked to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior is a common vow one takes when they join a church or get confirmed.

One person out of 20 said, "A Christian is someone who loves God and loves other people."... Jesus would say "how close that person was to the kingdom of God.

In scripture today, Jesus is having a busy day. According to the gospel of Mark, on Sunday of that week, Jesus created a sensation by entering Jerusalem on colt while his followers lay down their cloaks and leafy branches while they shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

On Monday, he went to the temple, drove out the merchants and money changers, and spent the day exciting the crowds with his teachings. On Tuesday, he was confronted by the chief priest, scribes and elders about his authority to do what he was doing and asking him tough questions about paying taxes and the resurrection.

It was on that Tuesday when we have our question in scripture today. One of the scribes, who would have been a teacher of the Jewish law, was impressed with Jesus and asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Now you have to know that when the scribe asked that question, he was asking - of the 613 laws, commandments, and practices of the Hebrew faith, which was the most important.

Of the 613 laws and commandments, Jesus picked two. First of all, like any good teacher, when he was asked to give one, he gave two. He picked one from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.*⁵ *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* (Jesus or Mark added "mind" to the list.) And second a part of Leviticus 19:18: ¹⁸*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.* And then according to Mark, Jesus added, *There is no other commandment greater than these.* "When the teacher of the law agreed with him, Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

I think this means that love is the ground of Christian faith and life. To be a Christian is about love - really.

It is important to remember that in the Bible, love is more than an emotion. Love is an attitude. So when it comes to God, we are to have an attitude of complete devotion – body, mind and spirit. It is about piety, prayer, connection and trust. Jesus invites us to have this kind of relationship with God. But right next to it, Jesus also put consideration of self and neighbor. Jesus invites us to love neighbor as ourselves. Lamar Williamson the New Testament scholar writes that it is a common misread to view the word “as” to mean “as much as” instead of “in the same way that.” So according to Williamson, we are to “love our neighbor in the same way that we love ourselves.”

I like that understanding until I realize that there are those who don't care about themselves very much so perhaps that explains why they don't care about others as well. But Williamson goes on to write, “So also we are to love our neighbor in the way that we love ourselves, that is, we are to be tolerant of, have time for, be interested in, make excuses for, deeply desire the welfare of our neighbor in the same way that we have these attitudes toward ourselves.” Love really?

Jesus didn't pick the dietary commandments that day as the most important. He didn't pick the ritual ones though loving God seems to imply them. He didn't pick one of the Ten Commandments. But then if we are going to love others in the same way that we love ourselves we can't kill, steal, lie or want what they have.

Jesus said to be one of his followers, to be close to the Kingdom of God is to love God and love our neighbor as we have consideration for ourselves. Love really!

I think we are supposed to do it. Our question might be, "What's in it for us?" – relationship, peace, satisfaction, joy. This is what is in it for us.

Many times I marvel how much my wife loves me. She has deep consideration for me. I marvel how much she cares about me and my welfare. But then on the other hand I am deeply concerned about her welfare and well being as well. Our attitude of love and consideration surprises each other and brings us joy. Does this mean that we never get angry, or disappoint, or hurt each other – hardly. But because we are tolerant of, have time for, are interested in, make excuses for, and deeply desire the welfare of each other, I am a very happy person, and I like to think she is too.

This past week, I had the opportunity to interview members of our confirmation class. It is part of their class to meet with one of the pastors in the fall and in the spring.

I can report that we have very bright and interesting youth in our church! I compliment our parents on the wonderful children you have. As part of the interview, I asked each youth about their extra curricula activities. Many are or were in some kind of sporting activity. To be in a sport means to practice regularly. We don't just give them a hockey stick or a football or a volleyball at the beginning of the season and say "Now go

out there and play the game.” We have them practice certain plays over and over again so they can do them in the game.

A wise pastor taught me once that belonging to a church means practicing how to be a Christian in the church so that we can be one out in the world. So maybe we need to be more direct in our time together in the church. Perhaps we need to say “OK today we are going to practice play #2- love of neighbor, and this is how we are going to do it.” Or “Today we are going to practice forgiveness, and this is how we are going to do it.” Or “today we are going to practice justice, and this is how we are going to do it.” Perhaps with some intentional practicing, perhaps we can do it.

Jesus seemed to be quite serious about the attitude of love. He taught, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*

One of the first Christians, the apostle Paul put it this way in Colossians 3: ¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord[□] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

A family is out for a drive on a Sunday afternoon. It is a pleasant afternoon, and they relax at a leisurely pace down the highway. Suddenly, the two children begin to beat their father in the back. “Daddy, Daddy, stop the car! There’s a kitten back there on the side of the road!”

The father says, "So there's a kitten on the side of the road, we're having a drive."

"But Daddy, you must stop and pick it up."

"I don't have to stop and pick it up."

"But Daddy, if you don't, it will die."

"Well then, it will have to die. We don't have room for another animal. We have a zoo already at the house. No more animals."

"But Daddy, are you going to just let it die?"

"Be quiet, children; we're trying to have a pleasant drive."

"We never thought our Daddy would be so mean and cruel as to let a kitten die."

Finally the mother turns to her husband and says, "Dear, you'll have to stop." He turns the car around, returns to the spot, and pulls off to the side of the road. "You kids stay in the car. I'll see about it." He goes out to pick up the little kitten, who is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, and full of fleas. When he reaches down to pick it up, with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claw. Hiss! He picks up the kitten by the loose skin at the neck, brings it over to the car, and says, "Don't touch it. It probably got leprosy."

Back home they go. When they get to the house the children give the kitten several baths, about a gallon of warm milk, and intercede: "Can we let it stay in the house just tonight? Tomorrow we'll fix it a place in the garage."

The father says, "Sure, take my bedroom; the whole house is already a zoo." They fix a comfortable bed, fit for a pharaoh. Several weeks pass.

Then one day the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down, and there is a cat. He reaches down toward the cat, carefully checking to see that no one is watching. When the cat sees his hand, it does not bare its claws and hiss; instead it arches its back to receive a caress. Is that the same cat? It couldn't be the same cat. It's not the same as that frightened, hurt, hissing kitten on the side of the road. Of course not, and you know as well as I what made the difference.

Not too long ago God reached out a hand to bless us. When God did, I looked at that hand; it was covered with scratches. Such is the hand of love, extended to those who are hurting. Love is the ground of Christian faith and life. Amen.