

PILGRIM UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
Sunday, October 26, 2008 — Pentecost XXIV (Proper 25)  
The Rev. John Tamilio, Senior Pastor

Sermon Title: “What Does This Love Look Like?”  
Gospel Lesson: Matthew 22:34-46 (NRSV)

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Tests! Tests! Tests! I never had a problem taking tests in school, but I was always annoyed by exams that were simply *regurgitation* — you know, memorize these facts and then simply repeat them. And what was worse were those multiple choice tests in which more than one answer seemed to be the correct one. It was as if the instructor was trying to trip us up. It was hard enough just to memorize tons of names, dates, and formulas. Why did we need to hurdle an obstacle course as well?

At the very start of today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus is presented with a test by the Pharisees — and it isn’t a test in which they want to learn something about him or his teachings. It is a test in which they want to see what he knows about Hebrew Law, but it is also a test in which they are trying to trip him up. They want to know which of the commandments in the Law is the greatest.

Now what is important to note here is that “Law” refers to the first five books of The Bible: what the Hebrews commonly call the Torah. Furthermore, when we hear the word “commandments” we often think about the “Ten Commandments.” In actuality there are 613 Laws or Commandments in the Torah, not ten! “Many of them governed sacrificial rites no longer performed by Jews or Christians,” as Kenneth Davis reminds us.<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees want to know which of the Commandments is the greatest. How does one answer that question? Aren’t they all important? More importantly, if the Greatest Commandment is to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and might, as we are told in Deuteronomy 6 (the prayer that the Jews call the *Shema*), then what about Jesus’ teachings to love others — friends as well as enemies — and to treat others the way that we wish to be treated? This is the paradox, the conundrum into which the Pharisees tried to entrap Jesus.

As usual, Jesus reframed the teachings of the Torah in such a way as to shine new light on them, not to change them. His answer to the question is that there are two commandments of equal importance: “You shall love the Lord your God with all

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much About the Bible* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1998), 125.

your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The Law and the Prophets were the two parts of the Hebrews Bible that were codified by the time of Christ. So, in other words, the command to love God wholeheartedly and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self sum-up all of Scripture, according to Jesus.

**Love.** It is all about love. Love is the answer to what The Bible and a life of faith is all about. As Emily Dickinson once wrote, “That Love is all there is, / Is all we know of Love.”<sup>2</sup> But the burning question before us today is, in a world that so often embodies the opposite of love — a world wrought with violence, war, and hatred — what does this “love” (about which Christ speaks) actually look like?

I think that depends upon the context.

We know, ideally, what love looks like between partners. We know what love looks like between parents and children, between good friends, and between those who show a sort of “civil-love” between one another. But what about the Church, which is our context? How do we show love within the Church?

There are two different ways that we can answer that question. First, there is the love that we show to those who are members of the church — our fellows parishioners. We visit them, send them cards, or bring them meals when they are sick. We celebrate the milestone moments in their lives (births, baptisms, weddings, anniversaries) and we mourn with them when a loved one dies. In the healthiest of congregations, these people are like members of our extended families. Yes, some of them may get on our nerves sometimes, just like members of our immediate families, but, overall, they are our sisters and brothers. They love us and they know that we love them.

Today, however, I want to focus on those who lie *outside* of our faith community and are longing for entry into it. This is the *real* love for “the other” that we are called to exhibit, like the love that we have for ourselves.

Once we are in — once we are part of the church, part of the *in* crowd — we often forget how difficult it is for some people to take that *first step* through the front door. Unfortunately, the church has an ugly history of making people feel unwelcome because they do not fit the norm. The 1950s model of the lily white church occupied

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson, “That Love is all there is” (1765) from *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*, Richard Ellmann, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 354.

by heterosexual couples with 2.3 children who live in suburbia with a two car garage still exists in many congregations — at least that is the desire. So when people enter their doors who do not conform to the dominant paradigm, because they are members of a minority race, part of the LGBT community, economically disadvantaged, or they have a disability, such people get the message pretty quickly: you are not welcome here; you do not fit the norm; why don't you go elsewhere — you know, to a church where there are more people of your kind. Call it ecclesial segregation. It exists in explicit and implicit ways in churches of all shapes, sizes, and denominations.

The God is still speaking campaign and the recent Congregation Vitality Initiative of our United Church of Christ has challenged all of us — and even those in other denominations — to truly embody the love of Christ by welcoming all people (*no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey*) into the membership and ministry of our churches. But this goes beyond simply saying, “You are welcome here.” It is *showing* such people that they are welcome here. It is letting such people know that they are accepted, not tolerated. (Who wants to be tolerated? You can tolerate someone and still hate him or her.) It is letting them know that we consider their sexual orientation totally normal, no matter what it is — that it isn't a choice, nor is it an abomination in the eyes of God. It is showing those of (quote-unquote) “minority” races that no one is part of the minority in the eyes of God. It is letting those who live with a sundry of ailments or disabilities that in God's house no one is physically-abled or disabled. People are just differently-abled. It is simply letting all people know that they have a home here where they will be loved for who they are, not judged for who they are not.

The problem is that because of the church's history of being a place of discrimination and judgment, many people who do not fit “the norm” are hesitant to enter a church if they do not know it is a safe place. Can you blame them? Many of us have heard — and some of us have experienced firsthand — the horror stories of churches that are less than welcoming. That is what being Open and Affirming is all about: it is letting those outside of the church know that this is a safe place. But it needs to go beyond even that. There are some (the unchurched) who do not know the inside language of terms such as “Just-Peace” and “Open and Affirming.” How do we reach them? How do we share the wholehearted love that we have for God and how do we love such people with the same love that we have for ourselves if they never enter our doors? It requires more than evangelical courage; it requires evangelical action.

The number one reason why people enter a new church for the first time isn't because they wandered in off the streets. Although our Still Speaking campaign has

reached a myriad of people that way, the main reason why people visit a church for the first time is because someone invited them. That puts the *ownness* on you and me to be ambassadors for Pilgrim. We are not only the first ones that people see when they enter these doors. In many cases we are the ones who will get them through these doors in the first place!

So here is the challenge that I put before you today. We have made several business card-size invitations to our church. It informs people of our open and welcoming nature. It also has a place on the back for you to place your name and telephone number so they know that if they have any questions about Pilgrim there is a friend that they can contact. In other words, they are not strangers in a strange place. During the offering, the ushers will pass these cards out. Take at least one — if you know of more people that you would like to invite to Pilgrim, by all means take more — but I would like everyone to take at least one. These cards are not for you. They are not to serve as bookmarks. They are not to adorn your refrigerators. This is your talking point: to invite another seeker into this house of hope. Can you imagine the results if we even got a ten to twenty percent return on this effort: if we took in twenty to forty new members by the end of the year?

Our lesson from the Scriptures today is one that challenges us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This love is made manifest in many ways — and one of the supreme ways is by inviting others who are searching for a spiritual home to be part of our family of faith. Robert Schnase reminds us that “People are searching for churches that make them feel welcome and loved, needed and accepted.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, “God’s grace activates interest and eagerness for relationship just as God’s grace shapes the invitational posture of congregations to reach out in love.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the love we have received has activated and inspired us to do the same. So let us step out in faith, with evangelical courage, and let us truly love our neighbors as we love ourselves by letting them know that Pilgrim is incomplete without them. Let us show the world what this love truly looks like. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.