

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SECOND SUNDAY in LENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: With heart and soul and voices we come to worship.
All: **We seek to love and serve the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind.**
One: So come to give thanks and praise.
All: **We come to rejoice in the goodness of the Lord our God.**

***OPENING HYMN** “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” GtG 366 [*Tune 761*]

1. **Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling;
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion;
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.**

2. **Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit;
let us find the promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.**

3. **Come, Almighty to deliver;
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
nevermore thy temples leave.**

(continued...)

**Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.**

- 4. Finish then thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.**

Words: Charles Wesley, 1747, alt.
Music: BEECHER, John Zundel, 1870
Public Domain

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from I John 4)*

One: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven."
All: **So rejoice and believe the good news of God's grace: that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, in Jesus Christ we are loved. Amen. Alleluia!**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 12:28-37

MARK 12:28-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;' 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.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides God there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

³⁵ While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? ³⁶ David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'"

³⁷ David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?" And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "The 'Why's and 'Wherefore's of Love" by Pastor Bill Vincent

We celebrate love in music and movie, story and song.
For all the celebration and affirmation we do regarding love, love is difficult.
Now don't get me wrong: love is great.
But it's also hard.

Love God with our whole being, whole self; with all that we are: every thought, every action, every decision, every day?

We don't seem to have what it takes. We're not up to it. It seems beyond us.

How do you love God with all your heart when your heart is broken, including the dreams that were in it?

How do you love God with all your soul when your soul is besieged, drained, and despairing?

How do you love God with all your mind when your mind is befuddled, adrift?

How do you love God with all your strength when your strength is sapped and non-existent?

And let's face it, there are some times when we just don't want to.

How do I love God with all my heart when my heart wanders and seeks after other 'gods'?

How do I love God with all my soul when my soul runs after others to be fulfilled and satisfied?

How do I love God with all my mind when my mind occupies itself with the frivolous and flirts with danger?

How do I love God with all my strength when my strength is used toward self-serving ends and to put down my neighbor?

All of this is to confess the difficulty in loving God fully.

And it's really hard to love our neighbor as ourself, especially when they're a pain in the neck.

Take that love chapter in I Corinthians, often used at weddings (a celebration of love).

Love is patient...

– for a little while.

Love is kind. Love is not envious...

– except for the nice, new car in my neighbor's driveway.

Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way...

– but I like my way...because it's right!

Love is not irritable or resentful...

– except for what my friend did to me last week.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth...

– unless it exposes me.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends... (I Corinthians 13:4-7 NRSV)

– except when it does.

And if this is a test, we don't pass.

Yes, it maybe easier, sometimes, to love God than love neighbor – God doesn't get on my nerves. But then there is that reminder:

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (I John 4:20 NRSV)

When you stack it all together, we're in a pickle when it comes to this command to love.

We could be in a quandary to even know what it means to love, except for...well, just look at who speaks these words.

Jesus: he who, in his life, did indeed love God with his whole self, heart and soul and mind and strength – even to his own detriment. Remember that prayer: *“Not my will, but yours...”* And he did love his neighbor as himself, getting into trouble for doing it; and even going so far as to ask for forgiveness for those who crucified him: *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

His is a wondrous life: a beautiful picture of what it means to love.

It is also a bleak prospect...for us.

Now, I am wary of the admonition, "Be like Jesus." That's an awful burden. Yet there is something fundamentally true about it. We are called Christians: "Christ-like" ones.

Argh! We can't do this! This is impossible!

How can we do this?

How could we do this?

I suggest to you the answer is discovered in the rest of the passage.

You remember, the scribe responds to Jesus' response,

“You are right, Teacher ... ‘to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Remember where this conversation is taking place? in the temple.

The temple: the only place where those *“whole burnt offerings and sacrifices”* take place.

The temple: the pinnacle of their worship.

And in this one sentence, this scribe has, in many ways, just dismissed the temple.

Love is more important than temple sacrifices.

Which is actually not a new thing to say.

We hear in the words of the prophet Hosea:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6 NRSV)

The classic prophetic statement regarding the priority of love, justice, mercy over sacrifices and ceremony.

So that, on the one hand, as Mark tells the story, these words reiterate something that has been said before: that love of God and neighbor is more important than sacrifices, i.e., the temple. But on the other hand, this statement of love is said with a twist, because of the locus and focus of this love, the definition and example of this love.

So Jesus raises that question about the Messiah. The Messiah is David's descendant, David's son. The Messiah is also David's Lord. How can this be?

Whatever else it means, this story highlights the primacy of Jesus Christ: the focus is on him.

But it also represents a shift in the history of God's people: from a system that commanded love, yet could not truly help us to love; to one – Someone – who commanded love

and even embodied that love, and who could and can and will help us to love; and who does so by transforming an instrument of hate – the cross – into a symbol of the power of love.

The focus is on Christ:

In him, we see what it means to love God, and to love our neighbor as self.

Through him, we learn how to love God, and to love our neighbor as self.

But more, by the power and blessing of Christ, we are enabled to love God, and to love our neighbor as self.

“How?” you may ask.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. ...

Jesus said.

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine.... Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ...

Then he says,

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

(John 15:4,5,12 NRSV)

The life of Jesus within us helps us live like him.

As we sung in our first hymn:

“Let us all thy life receive”

(“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” words by Charles Wesley, 1747)

Abide in him. Keep him ever before us. Be mindful of him. Focus our attention on him through prayer. Lift him up in worship. Get to know him through study, fellowship, and community.

So that, as Paul writes,

it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. (Galatians 2:20 NRSV)

His life in us enables us to live his life.

How? at a deeper level? Because God in Christ first loved us.

We love because God first loved us. (I John 4:19-nrsv)

We are called to love because God first loved us.

We are also enabled to love because God first loved us.

So we need to grow in our awareness of the height and length and depth and breadth of God's love for us.

For as we grow in our awareness of God's love for us, we grow in our ability to love God and neighbor as self.

As Isaac Watts says in one of his hymns:

Come, shed abroad a Savior's love,

– in that ‘first loving us’ –

Come, shed abroad a Savior's love,

And that shall kindle ours.

(“Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove” words by Isaac Watts, 1707)

I realize this may not answer all our questions about how we love.
It does not give us a 10-step program for how we are to love.
But it shows us the way.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Yes, it is a tall order.

But Jesus doesn't simply say this and then walk away.

He not only tells us, he shows us and helps us ... all the way to the cross ... and beyond.

***HYMN** “Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart” GtG 688 (*Verses 1, 3, & 5*)

1. **Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art,
and make me love thee as I ought to love.**

3. **Hast thou not bid us love thee, God and King;
all, all thine own, soul, heart, and strength, and mind?
I see thy cross; there teach my heart to cling.
O let me seek thee, and O let me find!**

5. **Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,
one holy passion filling all my frame;
the baptism of the heaven-descended Dove,
my heart an altar, and thy love the flame.**

Words: George Croly, 1867

Music: MORECAMBE, Frederick Cook Atkinson, 1870
Public Domain

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

One: How do you live for the love of God?

All: **I love because God first loved me. God loves me in Christ with a love that never ends. Amazed by grace, I no longer live for myself. I live for the Lord who died and rose again, triumphant over death, for my sake. Therefore, I take those around me to heart, especially those in particular need, knowing that Christ died for them no less than for me.**

(from *The Study Catechism: Full Version*, Copyright ©1998 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: God, in your mercy...
All: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

In thanks and praise we acknowledge the many gifts you have given us in love, O God. Accept now our offerings of resources and self as a sign of our commitment to love you with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me" GtG 703

**1. Jesus, thy boundless love to me
no thought can reach, no tongue declare;
O knit my thankful heart to thee,
and reign without a rival there!
Thine wholly, thine alone, I'd live;
myself to thee entirely give.**

(continued...)

2. **O grant that nothing in my soul
may dwell, but thy pure love alone;
O may thy love possess me whole,
my joy, my treasure, and my crown!
All coldness from my heart remove;
may every act, word, thought be love.**

3. **O Love, how gracious is thy way!
All fear before thy presence flies;
care, anguish, sorrow melt away
where'er thy healing beams arise.
O Jesus, nothing may I see,
nothing desire, or seek, but thee.**

Words: Paul Gerhardt, 1653; trans. John Wesley, ca. 1739, alt.
Music: ST. CATHERINE, Henri Frederick Hemy, 1864; alt.
James George Walton, 1874
Public Domain

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

The Prayer of Confession is reprinted by permission from *Book of Common Worship*, © 1993
Westminster/John Knox Press.

The Prayer for Illumination and Prayers of the People (adapted) are used by permission of Westminster
John Knox Press from *Feasting on the Word® Worship Companion*. Copyright 2014/2015.

The Prayers of the People (adapted) are written by Teri McDowell Ott and used by permission. ©
Presbyterian Outlook, 2024.