**Ancient Words** Rev. Dix Brachlow
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Matthew 22:34-40 Saint Paul, Minnesota
October 29, 2023

This, friends, is Reformation Sunday. The motto of the Presbyterian Church USA is “Reformed and always reforming,” something we take to heart as we try to change our ways to needs around us, even possibly changing the building itself. Martin Luther set the Reformation on its course in 1517, as this monk nailed to the church door demands for reforming the Catholic Church. John Calvin joined in his own ways, and then John Knox of Scotland, too. So, we spring out of that religious contention over what the church should be, ever re-forming into a people who love God and one another in the way and on the terms in which God loves us. It’s slow work. We’re still working at it!

Now, 500 years later, we are yet people divided over religion…and so many things: from views on politics and environment and wars in Ukraine and Gaza; and we differ in gender issues and schooling our children. Yet we do share many sayings, like little proverbs, sayings that describe our values and our culture. One teacher gave each child in her first-grade class the beginning words of some well-known saying and had them provide endings. Here is a sample of what they came up with:

*“Better to be safe than….punch a 5th grader*

*It's always darkest before...Daylight savings time.*

*Never underestimate the power of...termites.* (wonder about their house!)

*Children should be seen and not...grounded.*

*Laugh and the whole world laughs with you. Cry and... you have to blow your nose.”*

Revealing, even refreshing ways to see some things we have become quite used to! Putting these sayings into the hands of naïve and open-minded young ones makes me stop and think again. You, too?

It may be well for us to listen with new ears to this old biblical saying Jesus quoted to the religious leaders who tested him in the temple in Jerusalem:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.”* If you’ve grown up in a church, you have probably known this saying from childhood. Recorded about 1300 BC – that’s 3,300 years ago—these ancient words from Deuteronomy 6:5 were a foundational core for the Jewish faith, to love God with all one’s heart, soul and mind. Jesus was affirming to these leaders that he was a faithful follower of the Hebrew Scriptures and shared their faith.

But Jesus said more. He attached to it a commandment from Leviticus. Now, this is the only time in the church’s cycle of scripture readings that includes anything from Leviticus, a book of the holiness code for religious rituals and daily conduct. I’ve often thought of Leviticus as listing laws, one after another with “You shall not’s.” Chapter 19 says you shall not defraud your neighbor or steal; you shall not mistreat the deaf or the blind; you shall not show prejudice to the poor or defer to the great, and you shall not slander others, and on and on. [Verse 33 says: When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. . . you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”] So, Leviticus encourages justice and love from the people of Israel. Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18. “*You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against any of your people****, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”***

 The Pharisees who were putting Jesus to the test must have been surprised. When Jesus said this second commandment “is *like*” the first, the word “*like”* in the original Greek would mean that the Leviticus passage to love one’s neighbor held the same weight as the first one from Deuteronomy. Love of God finds its concrete expression in brotherly and sisterly love. Conversely, brotherly and sisterly love find their foundation in the love and support of God. Inseparable. These Pharisees made no response: they seemed to have been silenced. Perhaps this was because they themselves had not shown love for neighbor? Had they become so focused on their power and prestige as leaders, that love for others wasn’t part of their behavior or thinking? Perhaps they didn’t live up to these scriptural commandments themselves, so dared not comment.

Nowadays, most everyone knows that of all people, Christians are supposed to love their neighbor. But I wonder how we are living up to that “mark of the Christian,” to love one another as we love ourselves. We may think we’re doing just fine – loving others, that is – until we stop to review our day. I know I get jealous of friends’ new car/home/kitchen remodel/ hot pot, you name it. And sometimes I am not fully honest: the other day, when my husband said the garage door had been standing open when he came home, I defended myself, saying I was sure I’d hit the remote to close it when I drove off. Had I forgotten and just said that to save face? Too easily we use words that wound someone, even if we don’t realize it at the time. And h ow many times have I turned away from someone standing with a cardboard sign and in obvious need? It is difficult to live a day following the call to love one another. That basic commandment is obviously difficult to maintain. Why can’t we seem to love our neighbor as ourselves? What’s gone wrong?

Ted Loder, a preacher and theologian, examines our human tendency to fail at love in his book, *The Haunt of Grace*. He says, *“Start with the obvious truth that we are all connected. That’s the way God put the world together. What happens to any of us affects all of us, like it or not. Many people don’t like it, and many don’t acknowledge the connection. Even so, the inescapable truth is that everything and everyone on earth is connected. That’s the ecosystem of life. Connection is a given.”* (Loder, “New Rules of Engagement,” *The Haunt of Grace*, Innisfree Press, Inc., Philadelphia, 2002, p. 141.)

“But,” Loder continues, “*engagement is a choice. The choice is whether or not to make connections vital, not just formal; intimate, not superficial; sustaining, not empty.”* Think about the connections you have with people – which are vital, intimate, and sustaining connections? Family members, neighbors, friends, other church members. You know the stereotype that we are “Minnesota nice,” but not really friendly? We extend a hand and a smile, and may even say “Hello,” but then turn aside and move on. Is this “niceness” that avoids engagement a reason why we so often fail at making deeper and more meaningful connections with others?

*Engagement,* Loder continues, *“involves pressing beyond shallow niceness and congeniality, agreement and pretense, to more honest and deep relationships.”* He says, “*It is to talk* ***to*** *others, rather than talking* ***about*** *them. Engagement is about building trust between each other by saying what we mean and meaning what we say. Without trust, love shrivels.”* That’s Ted Loder’s comment.

Building trust between people takes time and it takes courage. We may start conversations by talking about other things—sports, weather, the kids’ schools, cars, and so forth,-- but it takes courage and trust to reveal our real selves. When someone trusts us enough to tell us their realities and fears, we need to attend, to listen with respect and care. When we honestly share hard truths that we usually keep hidden, then something deeper, more healing and redemptive can open up. Our connection becomes true engagement; that’s when love can take hold.

Engagement is what Jesus was about. He was always sitting at tables with all kinds of unsavory people, eating and talking with them. He touched and healed and engaged people who were avoided by others. Recall his encounter with the woman at the well in John 4. She was drawing water alone outside a city in Samaria. Now, Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans, so it was unusual that Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. *Jesus went on not only to share water with her, but also conversation.* He conversed with her, telling the truth: that she had had five husbands and was living with someone not her husband. His words went to the heart of her life. She may have been promiscuous, or other scholars suggest she was a victim. You see, in that culture, a man could divorce his wife by declaring it, meaning that this woman may have been discarded five times already. (James Moore, *God Was Here & I Was Out to Lunch*, Dimensions for Living, Nashville, 2001, p. 48)

Jesus told her, *“Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give them will never thirst; the water that I shall give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* Her immediate response was, *“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty.”* He revealed to her that he is the Messiah. She rushed back to the people in her city saying, *“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”* She’d become one of the first “evangelists,” inviting others to see Jesus. As with her, Jesus spoke with people about their life and their truth, even when difficult. He engaged with them deeply, respecting them and showing God’s love.

We want to do that, too, don’t we? We at House of Hope really do attend to our neighbors: we grow vegetables, donate food and all sorts of clothing and supplies, helping people in need. We reach out into our community in matters of grieving, or domestic abuse, gun violence, opioid misuse, mental illness, homelessness, and we send help to people affected by tragic wars and other catastrophes. I am impressed by the many ways we strive to bring heaven upon this earth, walking in the shoes of Jesus, showing love for neighbors.

 We’re good at reaching out, but maybe we need more help reaching inward. Most of us also dearly want to love our neighbor who is down the pew or on the livestream. I want to engage here, to enjoy friendships that are deep and grounded by love. But, --and you’ll agree, I’m sure – that is hard to do in any large church of over a thousand people!

Have you had this experience? I remember reaching out my hand to a couple, asking them if they are new or visiting House of Hope, only to have them reply, “No, we’ve been members for fifteen years!” Embarrassing. I’m not alone, I think. One can get lost in a big church. And those who live-stream may feel this even more, much as we welcome and are glad for any who cannot be here in person. Making meaningful connections takes a lot of planning and dedication. And I’ve felt discouraged myself.

But I find I’m not alone in longing for better ways to connect and engage with one another more. I was heartened as I listened to our architect Paul May at the seminar a few Sundays ago. The architect’s designs for House of Hope had been built upon extensive interviews with most of us, you and me. The ideas were hopes and dreams of people here, of you and me. Lots of people had voiced the need for brighter, more open places to gather, places that support the needs of kids and musicians and groups. People envisioned large fellowship rooms (and kitchens) so we could not only prepare lots of meals, but also eat them together. We wanted ways to fulfill requests for weddings and receptions, too. The architect’s plans confirm that we want spaces where people can gather and build relationships. They indicated to me that we do not want to be just Minnesota “nice”, but we want to really engage with one another; get to know one another better, to deepen spiritually and nurture and love one another.

So, right now, until this HVAC construction is completed, each of us may need to find ways to connect with one another very intentionally. We can get coffee or share a meal, maybe go to a concert, serve or volunteer together, or join or create a group here, anything to forge connections. It’s for engendering love of neighbor.

Through his earthly life, Jesus showed us how this love should look. He called his disciples to a life of sacrifice and service. Servanthood? How’s that? Unless you are a parent of young children, or a caregiver, most of us find that our lives demand very little in the way of servanthood. Our Christianity seems to focus on joy and happiness, not self-denial or sacrifice. Yet Jesus’ call to love our neighbor bears a cost. To go out of our way when we see a problem we could alter often requires a sacrifice of ourselves. It is, in Christian lingo, a way of “taking up your cross.”

You know that crosses in the Roman world were instruments of suffering and death. The paradox stands that, while a symbol of death, the cross became a symbol of resurrection hope and new life…all because of Jesus.

Today’s two commandments can be seen in the cross. The vertical beam reminds us of our relationship with God, of God’s love and salvation in Jesus Christ. The Divine reaches down to us with love and we reach up in gratitude and praise, loving God “with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind.”

The cross beam held Jesus’ arms outspread in sacrifice, reminding us of Jesus’ love reaching out to heal and make people whole. Like Jesus, we reach out to one another in caring love, as horizontal relationships with others. You don’t have a cross without the vertical AND the horizontal beams. As our relationship with God becomes strong, our relationship with others is strengthened, loving and serving them.

In Keith Miller’s book *A Second Touch* (Waco: Word Books, 1967, pp. 63-67) there is a story about a busy executive in an eastern city who was rushing to catch a commuter train one morning. *The man had an important meeting at the office, and he needed to make this train to get there on time. Just as he was about to board the train, he accidentally bumped into a little boy who was carrying a boxed jigsaw puzzle. The box went flying, and the pieces scattered everywhere. What should he do? Should he stop and help the little boy pick up the pieces? Or should he get on the train? He couldn’t do both; there was not enough time! If he stopped to help, he would miss the train and be late. What should he do? What would you have done?*

*Well, the man stopped and helped the boy pick up the puzzle as the train pulled out. The little boy watched him closely with a kind of awe. The boy said, “Mister, you missed your train.”*

*“I know,” the man said.*

*“Will you be late for work?” the boy asked.*

*“Yes, but it was more important that I stop and help you.”*

*Then the boy said, “Mister, can I ask you a question?”*

*“Yes, of course.”*

*“Mister, are you Jesus?”*

*Keith Miller wrote, “And for the moment, the man realized that – on that platform – he had been.” That little boy saw the light of Jesus in that man’s act of Christ-like love.*

Self-sacrifice is not an option in discipleship, nor is it reserved for a few spiritual giants or theologians, but is at the very heart of what it means for each person to follow Christ. Jesus reached back to Deuteronomy and Leviticus, combining the ancient words for us to follow. They form the heart and soul of the church.

So what proverbs or sayings can steer us and direct our thoughts and words and actions? Help me out.

*It’s always darkest before … (the dawn)*

*Those who wait for the Lord (shall renew their strength) (Isaiah 4:1)*

*The Lord is my shepherd, ( I shall not want.)*

*Never underestimate the power of… (a woman? No, Love!)*

And today’s verse: *You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. And a second is like it: (You shall love your neighbor as yourself.)”*

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. May God help us to faithfully live out these ancient words.

Pray with me. Loving God, you have given us ancient words of wisdom to mark our lives. Renew our weary souls; and when we stray, turn us back. Guide us to love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, for we need you so in this brief, precious journey on earth together. Amen.

**Benediction**

God is ever making us, shaping us

Blessing us, trusting us,

Leading us, disturbing us,

Empower us, and loving us.

Go into this week,

Secure in the **everlasting love** of God

Renewed by the **sacrificial love** of Jesus,

Empowered by the **active love** of the Holy Spirit. Amen.