Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper
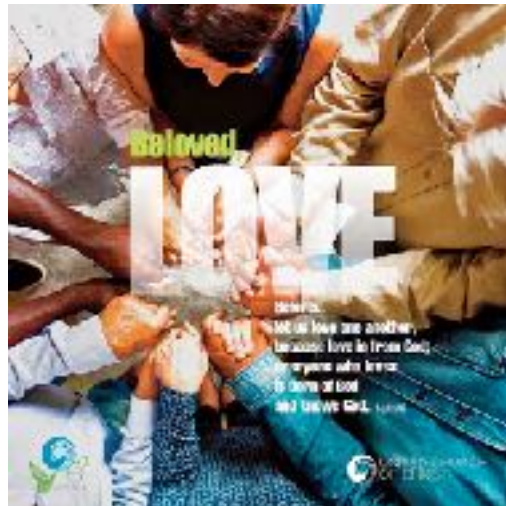
Sunday, November 8, 2020

First of Three in a Stewardship Campaign Sermon Series entitled:

"Beloved, Love"

"Beloved, Love Your Neighbor"

Christian Scripture: Matthew 22:34-40

Everyone knows I'm not so hot at delivering humor in sermons. Yet, everyone once in a while, I come-up with a real 'zinger' that has everyone howling for days. Today is just such an occasion whereby I'm going to deliver a real 'doozie' in order to kick-off our three-week stewardship campaign.

One year, the dilapidated old church building desperately needed remodelling. So the pastor made an impassioned appeal from his pulpit – looking directly at Deacon Goldman, the richest man in town. In the middle of his plea, a slab of plaster fell from the ceiling and struck the rich man on the shoulder. He quickly jumped to his feet and shouted, "Pastor, I will double my pledge". Then he sat down, just as a larger chunk of plaster fell and hit him on the head, forcing him to stand again and holler, "Pastor, I will give fifty-thousand dollars!" This prompted Deacon Philips to then shout-out, "Hit him again, Lord! Hit him again!"

Now, I tell that joke for many reasons. One, as the deacons well know, while we do not have 'plaster' falling of the ceiling of our sanctuary, but we do have 'paint' falling and we need donations to have it fixed!

Yet, most importantly the humor reminds us that during this stewardship season we are called to reflect upon and discern in our hearts the degree to which we are committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and thus to the ministry of this local church in Brattleboro as it demonstrates that gospel in our community and in our world. In two weeks' time on November 22, our discernment will culminate on Thanksgiving/Pledge Sunday. We will then offer that which we are able to support the ministries of this church.

For the interpretation of the scripture reading, I considered dazzling you this morning with erudite theological insights which I, and only I, could possibly offer (sarcastically stated). Remember the three years of *fides quaerens intellectum* or "faith seeking understanding" about which I spoke to you last week? However, to be honest, this morning's scripture does not really require much interpretation. Jesus' teaching is pretty self-explanatory. You see the priests, lawyers, and scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they wished to twist Jesus in knots, trip him up with the law, cause him to get lost in nuance

and misspeak through pedantic legalese. Jesus did not fall for it. And neither will I. Neither will we.

They asked Jesus "which is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered, "Love God with all your soul and with all your mind". Here, Jesus referenced Deuteronomy 6:5. Jesus continued, "And the second it like it: Love your neighbor as yourself". Here, Jesus referenced Leviticus 19:19.

The only thing I will say about this scripture is that Jesus' answer - to love God - was not a surprise. Perhaps that which was more prophetic was the second commandment – to love your neighbour - by which Jesus taught how to implement the first and most important commandment – to love God. Think of loving God as the '*what*' and loving your neighbour as the '*how*'. You see, Jesus spoke of the practical means by which we demonstrate our love for God.

The writer of the first book of John clearly comprehended the meaning of Jesus' message when he wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God, everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

For the next three weeks we will remind ourselves of Three Great Loves as we encourage one another to give financially to the ministry of this church: Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, and Love of Creation.

I firmly believe that the most effective demonstration of my love for God is my tithing to Centre Congregational Church (I usually do it every second Friday, electronically, after I am paid). This church is *the best* means by which I know how to love my neighbor. Let me give you three examples.

One, on Friday afternoon, I received a cold call from an elderly woman in our community. She explained she had no family and she was isolated due to

COVID. She told me she struggled with depression and loneliness. She requested that I refer her to another person in the church, preferably a woman, who understood depression and who could just reach out to her and talk to her. I was on it. I wrote to who I thought was the perfect person in our church, who then immediately responded that she would reach-out to this woman. *That* is loving our neighbor.

Two, our church, through your giving and my representation on the board of the Help Fund, works with social workers throughout Brattleboro and provides the best, the most strategic, and the most accountable assistance to those in our community (particularly single women with children) and thus assists them to acquire safe affordable housing, or repair the car, or pay the electricity, or pay a medical bill. *That* is loving our neighbor.

Third, our church hosts and subsidizes with other churches, particularly our friends at St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Loaves & Fishes and Carry Me Home. These two ministries put food on the table and clothes on the bodies of neighbors in our community and on the other side of the Earth. May God bless Centre Congregational Church for supporting this valuable ministry with both time and treasure. Without your tithe, forecasted by the pledge you will make in two weeks' time, there would be no staff at the other end of the phone, there would be no contributions to the Help Fund, and there would be no kitchen or electricity for Loaves & Fishes.

Friends, I urge you for the next two weeks to sit, pray, and plan your annual giving to the ministries of this church. It is through our tithes and offerings that we love our neighbor and therefore how we love our God.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".