

Displaying Your Faith

Deuteronomy 6:1-9
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First Presbyterian Church
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The Rev. Larry Satorius concluded his Summer Forum series last week on the Church in America by noting the language barrier the church faces when our theological and ecclesiastical verbiage fails to reach the younger generations. The word ecclesiastical, by the way, means anything relating to the church, while theology is anything relating to God.

As Christians, we've inherited a complex system of doctrines, a belief system that is challenging to learn, apply and teach. Things like salvation, righteousness, sin and temptation, grace and mercy and forgiveness – these are multilayered concepts that challenge us in how we view ourselves, how we treat each other, and what we expect from God and from the world.

And Larry is right. Regardless of the reason, fewer and fewer people in this country understand the basics of Christianity. And yet, the basics of Christianity are not that hard to teach – Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. It all builds on that, rests on that.

This is what our Old Testament lesson is telling us. Moses is standing at the edge of the Promised Land – the land of Canaan, the land of “milk and honey” and all things good, which God gave to the faithful in keeping with his covenant – his promise – going all the way back to Abraham, who is our spiritual ancestor. We as Christians share in and live in the promise of safety and prosperity that God made to Abraham.

Moses is standing at the edge of the Promised Land with all God's faithful, and he's longing to lead them into safety and prosperity. But Moses is not able to make that final leg of the journey with them. His time on earth is running out.

So, Moses makes one last speech to God's faithful, pleading with them to not give up on their faith as they move into this strange-yet-oh-so-promising new land.

“Now,” says Moses, “this is the commandment ... that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy....” That's how he begins.

And because the commandment he is about to give is so hard to actually keep and teach and live into, Moses makes a point to say just how important it is. God has given you this particular commandment, says Moses, “so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life....” The word fear actually means to respect – respect the Lord God over and above all else.

That's hard to do, isn't it? We tend to pay more attention to worldly things than we do to godly things. So, we need to know and follow the commandment Moses is about to share with them, as if our lives depend on it. Because they do.

Moses says that God charged him with the responsibility of teaching this particular commandment and "all (of God's) decrees and ... commandments ... so that your days may be long..., so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey," the land of safety and prosperity.

Do you remember what this incredibly powerful-yet-challenging commandment is?

"Hear, O Israel" – hear, O Congregation: "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart," says God. "Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

That's it. That's the most important thing we can do as God's faithful to ensure that the land in which we live is a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of safety and prosperity. Love God and – as Jesus adds – love your neighbor as yourself.

Easy to understand; hard to do. And it's getting harder, folks. It's getting harder because we do not follow this one, simple commandment.

We may think we do, but we don't. Not as fully and faithfully as we could, as we must. And not only that, we actually lose sight of this commandment because we focus too much on other stuff.

We don't go to church every week because we have other stuff to do. We don't recite this commandment to our children and talk with them about it at home and when we are out in the community and when we wake up and when we go to bed, because the world is too distracting and too busy.

We don't put this Love Commandment as a sign on our hand or anywhere else on our body, or outside our front door, or as a plaque in our homes, because we've found other cute and clever things to display to the world – through tattoos and T-shirts and bumper stickers and welcome mats and wall plaques.

Take for instance the guy who opened the door of his BMW only to have a car come along and hit the door, ripping it off completely. When the police arrived at the scene, the man was complaining bitterly about the damage to his precious BMW. "Officer, look what they've done to my Beeeemer!!!" he whined.

“You rich guys are so materialistic, you make me sick,” said the officer. “You’re so worried about your stupid BMW that you didn’t even notice your left arm was ripped off.” “Oh, my gaaad,” said the rich guy, looking where his arm used to be, “What happened to my Rolex?!?”

We don’t value the Love Commandment or any of God’s teachings enough to put them as a sign on our hand or wrist or anywhere else on our body.

And if we do have something like the Love Commandment displayed somewhere, we think of it as a private message between us and God; not as a conversation starter or an object lesson to share with someone who doesn’t know what it takes to truly love God and neighbor.

That’s the truth of it for far too many people and households in this world, and in this community, and in your neighborhood. And so we have an opportunity here to recommit ourselves to living and teaching the Love Commandment to others.

If only for this week, if only for one day – be bold enough to actually put God and neighbor first in your heart and soul and mind and tell others what that is like for you – recite it, share it with those who are children in the faith, those who don’t know what it means to love God and neighbor, and don’t know why it is so important, why it is most important.

That’s our challenge, and our opportunity – to share with people our love of God and neighbor in such a way that they want to know more, experience more of what it is to be in a family of faith. In fact, Emily Hollembaek put a sign outside this church on Thursday that says, “Love your neighbor (no exceptions).”

Look, what we have to offer here is not hidden. Anyone who comes to this church with an open mind and a willing heart gets a sense of God’s love for us all, and our love for them. And many of those visitors find a home here.

Isn’t that wonderful?!? And yet, how much do we talk about that? How much do we focus on the people who’ve come to us at various stages in their knowledge and understanding of Jesus?

Really, that should be our greatest concern, don’t you think – celebrating those who’ve found a home here, getting to know them as well as we knew those who are no longer here.

So yes, the problem with society is that far too many people, too many generations of people, have given up on the church. But let’s not add to that problem by failing those people who do come to us.

And even if society has given up on the church, does this mean it has given up on God, on Jesus, on an inner sense faith and hope, peace and love? I don't think so. No, they have not given up on God and this is no time for us to give up on them, by failing to display in word and deed our love of God and neighbor, which is at the core of our faith. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of glory, we praise you for your presence in our lives and for all goodness that you shower upon us in Jesus Christ.

Especially we praise and thank you for promises kept and hope for tomorrow; the enjoyment of friends; the joy of families; the wonders of your creation; those who have gone before us; love from our parents, sisters and brothers; love from our spouse and children; our family of faith and the church.

God of grace, remind us that we are all your children, for we are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

We offer our prayers for those whom you love. We pray especially for those we too often forget: people who have lost hope, those who mourn, victims of disasters, those who suffer because of war, those who go hungry, those dealing with sickness and disease.

Hear our, prayers, O God, as we come before you praying together the prayer that you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.