

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Mark 12:28-34

February 15, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Focus on the Big Message

ALL IN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friday night a week ago, Regina and I sat with our middle school confirmation group around tables in the Fellowship Hall. We looked through the confirmation notebooks that had been made for them. The first activity of the night (after eating and some rousing rounds of the Name Game, Name Four, Hand Slap, and Behind the Blanket) was to talk about the question, “What is a Christian?”

Here’s the first question our young people were asked to think about and write about: “If a friend asked you what it means to be a Christian, how would you answer?” We had some good discussion based on their insightful answers.

That question/answer exercise led into the next activity. They were given a list of items with these instructions: “Circle the ones that are important for being a Christian. Underline the ones that aren’t necessary for being a Christian, but can help you be a Christian.” Here’s the list:

Believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

Give money to the church.

Love your neighbors as yourself.

Be kind and thoughtful to other people.

Attend the Presbyterian Church every week.

Read your Bible and pray every day.

Never do any work on Sunday.

Tell others about God.

Become a member of the Wallace Presbyterian Church.

Which items would you have circled as important or necessary for being a Christian?

Which items would you have underlined as not necessary for being a Christian, but helpful for being a Christian?

In a sense, the young people — and, by extension this morning, all of you — are being asked, “What is most important in your life of faith?”

Is it the rituals of the faith? Is it the church building? Is it Christian disciplines? Is it doing things the way we’ve always done them? Is it knowing all of the right words and believing all of the right things? Is it following all of the rules? Or is it something much, much more?

One day a scribe approached Jesus and heard him arguing with some of his fellow religious leaders. This particular scribe was impressed with the answers Jesus was giving, so he asked a question of his own: “What is the most important thing in the life of faith?” Well, actually he asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus could have picked from 600+ laws and commandments. Jesus could have said, “Follow the Ten Commandments.” Jesus could have said something like, “Which commandment is **first** of all? They’re all important. But since you asked, let me give you a prioritized list.”

Instead, Jesus went back to the foundation and core of the Jewish faith when he said, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.’” Immediately the scribe would have understood what Jesus was talking about. Jesus cut to the chase — love God with *everything* you have, with everything you *are*.

The scribe asked, “Which commandment (singular) is first of all?” But Jesus gives him two: “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

There’s that word again — love — and it’s the same word we heard so much about in last week’s sermon — *agápe* love. According to Jesus, you can’t separate love for God and love for neighbor. The scribe asked “Which one?” Jesus answered, “These two.” But he might as well have said, “This one — love God/love neighbor.”

In a commentary of sorts on this dialogue between the Jewish scribe and Jesus about what is most important in the life of faith, 1 John 4:20 - 5:3 says, “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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome . . .”

Today’s sermon title, “All In,” was inspired by a testimony of faith from one of our new elders when he was being examined for installation. When the session meets with our elders-elect, I ask each of the new elders to share his/her story of faith and, more specifically, to finish the story by answering this question: “Why did you say ‘yes’ when you were asked to serve on the session?” Hearing the stories of men and women each year is a highlight of my work with our elders. All of us have stories to tell about how God has worked in our lives and about how we have tried to respond to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We need to tell and hear each other’s stories more often . . .

One of our new elders shared his experience of God’s grace and his faith journey. Then he added that he was working hard in his life to grasp and live out the idea of

being “all in” in his faith — not just when it’s convenient, not just when he has some spare time, not just when it is comfortable. That struck me as a profound thought and goal — being “all in” in our faith. Isn’t that what Jesus meant when he named the greatest commandment(s) — Love God/Love neighbor?

Love God — with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Here’s something I shared with Bible study folks the other day about what that means. It comes from a sermon called “A Rock Solid Foundation for Living.”

“HEART: namely our emotional being. This is not just our ‘feeling’ life, but the seat of our identity. Strength of identity and sense of wholeness comes with the affirmation that, “*God made me. God loves me, I am a child of God. God’s love and love of God flows in every fiber of who I am.*”

SOUL: namely our spiritual being. It is important to realize that we are, at the heart of it all, spiritual beings. We were designed to live and function in partnership with God. To love God with all of my soul is to live with a sense of constant, conscious contact with God.

MIND: namely our intellectual being. Our thoughts, attitudes and thinking patterns are shaped by the love of God and love for God. St. Paul wrote that we should not be shaped by the patterns of this world’s thinking, but to be transformed by “*the renewing of your mind.*” [Rom. 12:2]

STRENGTH: namely our physical being. We are physical beings. The Christian faith rejoices in this. We are not ‘anti-body’ as though the body was a bad thing. The earliest church struggled with people who believed that the physical world and physical things are bad, but the Psalmist wrote, “*We are fearfully and wonderfully made.*” [Ps. 139:14] To love God with all of our strength is to love God even with our physical selves. One way we can do that is to *be there for God*. You know what it means to say you will *be there* for someone. When they struggle you actually become physically present for the person. To *be there* for God is to be God’s person in the world around you.”¹

Recently my sermons have had the overarching heading “Focus On the Big Message.” As I mentioned a few weeks ago, our session has made a commitment to “focus on the big message” during 2015 as we seek God’s direction for our congregation and nurture all of us in our spiritual growth. If you were to ask me, “What is the big message?” I would have to say, “Love God/Love neighbor.” You might ask, “What does that mean?” or, more precisely, “How are we supposed to do that?” That’s the question, isn’t it?

So far in this series of sermons we have heard:

* “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (John 13:14)

* “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8)

* "[If] I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . [If] I do not have love, I am nothing . . . [If] I do not have love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:1,2,3)

* "To love him 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." (Mark 12:33)

My favorite Bible verses are Romans 14:7-9: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." My favorite Bible story is the one we heard this morning about the Great Commandment. In a sense, Paul is saying the same thing that Jesus told that curious scribe who wanted to know what was most important in life. We belong to God, so let us live for God, heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Let's go back to the question we began with: "If a friend asked you what it means to be a Christian, how would you answer?" I would answer,

"Believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." Several years ago, I decided this would be the plumb line, the measuring stick for my life. Almost immediately and at one and the same time, I felt an enormous sense both of liberation and challenge. Liberation from a constant fear of trying to meet some list of requirements. Challenge from the call to be "all in" in my life of faith. Do I always get it right? Absolutely not! Will I keep trying to live this way, to be "all in"? Absolutely!

I told the Bible study folks Wednesday I was tempted to step in the pulpit this morning and say, "Love God. Love neighbor. Go and do it. Amen." Well, obviously that didn't happen! But I'll end this sermon with a slight variation:

Love God. Love neighbor. ***With God's help***, go and do it. ***With God's help***, let's go "all in" for God.

Let us pray: (A prayer from St. Anselm, 11th century A.D.)

O Lord our God, grant us grace to desire you with our whole heart; that so desiring we may seek and find you; and so finding you may love you; and loving you, may hate those sins from which you have redeemed us. Amen.

NOTES

¹Author unknown, "A Rock Solid Foundation for Living," November 5, 2000, at www.lectionarysermons.com.