

## Pastor's Message – 10/25/20 Matthew 22:34-40

I had the privilege of officiating at the funeral of Larry Stanton, a member of the Waupun United Methodist Church, last week Tuesday. I hope that you are continuing to keep his family and friends in your prayers as they grieve their loss. Over the past year, I have been invited to lead 12 funeral services, both for members and non-members of the Church, and many more during the course of my pastoral ministry.

Sometimes, after a graveside committal service, I've had the opportunity to wander among the graves and look at the grave markers as I've waited for the funeral directors to give me a ride back to the funeral home. Wandering around and looking at the grave markers and seeing the epitaphs on the gravestones has caused me to wonder what I would like, if I have one, an epitaph on my gravestone. Something short, something profound, something meaningful that would sum up my life in just a few characters.

Even in my job as a Pastor, with the most basic skill being communications, that is hard to do. It's hard to get across, sometimes, everything that needs to be said – in a tweet, an email, a telephone call or even mask-to-mask. It's hard to show a smile behind a face covering, in an email or even a telephone call. They are all limiting.

With limited face-to-face contact now, we need to use so many more ways of communicating now. Telephone contacts, email, Facebook posts and Twitter, among other things, have become more important and necessary and helpful [or not]. It used to be that tweets, the messages sent on Twitter, were limited to 140 characters. I've never got involved in Twitter and tweeting, after all, how much can you really say in 140 characters!

Some of them, however, can be funny or provocative or profound. Consider these:

Funny: "Everyone says to follow your dreams, so I went back to bed."

Provocative: "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future!"

Profound: "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."

What if Twitter had existed in the first century? Jesus might have been the greatest master of the tweet. In just a few words in the gospel of Matthew, he answers a tough theological question. The Pharisees gathered together, and

one of them — a lawyer — asked Jesus a question to test him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (22:34-36).

Tough question. If you name one, you’ll be accused of ignoring others. If you say they all are great, you look weak for not answering the question.

Jesus could have said that all 10 of the Ten Commandments were equally important. Or that the book of Leviticus was the greatest expression of God’s law. Or that the entire Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, contained the fullness of the commandments of God.

There were, of course, a lot of commandments to choose from. The rabbis of Jesus’ day counted 613 commands in the law -- 248 positive commands, corresponding to the number of parts of the body, and 365 negative commands, corresponding to the days of the year. The prevailing view was that all the commandments were equal, with any ranking of them seen as the height of human arrogance.

In spite of that, Jesus gave a tweet-sized response: “‘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. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (vv. 37-39). Jesus then names the greatest commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 74 characters. The Greatest Tweet.

On this, he says, “hang all the law and the prophets” (v. 40). Case closed.

A preaching professor named David Lose says that “our Lord names his center” with this greatest of commandments. Yes, his center. Jesus is tweeting “the center of his ministry, the center of his mission, the center of the kingdom he has been sent to proclaim and build.” The center is love.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, there has been information and disinformation, guidelines from medical experts and from government and from our own Wisconsin United Methodist Conference and our Bishop’s Task Force about ways to manage and navigate the dangers and threats from the coronavirus. Wash your hands, practice social distancing, stay home when sick, wear a face covering. We have had to learn new ways of living and new ways of “doing” church.

There have been “stay-at-home” orders and requirements for mask-wearing from government, from businesses and the Church. Some have said that these guidelines and requirements have been infringements on personal rights. It is my opinion that these dovetail with Jesus’ interpretation of the commandments for Christian living. If these things, like hand washing and social distancing, staying home when sick and wearing face coverings help to

protect others from an enemy like the coronavirus, are these not ways in which we love others and care for others?

This Church discontinued public worship as of March 16 when it was recommended, but, in the meantime, the leadership of the Church and I feel that we have found ways to gather in as safe a manner as possible and still worship God as we are called to do and need to do. Resuming public worship on June 21, people have been responsible and practicing loving ways of relating to each other and I am proud of this Church for your efforts and conscientious and responsible behavior. I am grateful that this Church has been willing to spend the money to purchase hand-washing stations and masks and the equipment necessary for us to livestream our worship and the people who have been so faithful to make that happen. There are no guarantees, but you have done well. I am not so much a believer in Mark 16.18 that I am willing to ignore science and the medical advice of people more knowledgeable than me.

Sometimes it's hard to know what it means to "love" someone, whether God or our neighbor or even ourself. We may think it means to have warm and cozy feelings about them, which we all know simply isn't going to happen all the time -- even for people we deeply and truly love, like our life partner, our kids, or our dearest friends. I don't believe God commands us to have warm fuzzy feelings. Love is action on behalf of the loved one's greatest good; and while the regular practice of such action is likely to be accompanied sooner or later by warm emotional concern, it's not the emotion that matters. It's the action.

Our gospel story today says that a Pharisee asked Jesus "a question to test him." That's what Matthew says. And Luke agrees in his version of the same story (10:25ff). Mark has a different take (12:28-34). Mark says that the scribe, or lawyer, was really interested and was really asking. And when Jesus answered, the lawyer claps his hands and says, "Yeah, that's what I thought; that's what makes sense; cool; thanks, Jesus." And Jesus is impressed by him, and says, "You've got it. You're on the right track, almost there."

"Almost there. Not far from the kingdom," that's what he says. What I wouldn't give to hear that from Jesus. I'm hoping to hear "well done, good and faithful servant." But whether it was a test or a genuine question, Jesus answers the same. What's the greatest commandment? The number one law? The summation of the code? That is not really the question Jesus is answering. I mean, it is the question Jesus is answering, but not only that. It is not just a legal question; it is not just a doctrinal question. It is a life question, a living question.

“How can I be alive?” That could have been or should have been the question that Jesus was asked. How can I be alive? Fully alive? How can I be perfect?

That’s a question I have discussed with other Christians, even other United Methodist Christians. Are we really moving onto perfection? Can, do we expect, to be made perfect in this life? Perfection, Christian perfection, or perfection in love anyway, is not a state of being. It is not a standard to achieve, not a behavior to perform. Instead, it is an intent. It is a journey; it is a process. It is the desire to do the will of God in all things. And I can do God’s will now, knowing what I know, having lived the life I have lived to this point. And I can do God’s will in the future, when I know more, have lived more, loved more. Steve Harper, the author of the book *The Way to Heaven*, describes a parent who measures a child in development and declares that the child is perfect for a four-year-old. But not done, obviously. Not complete. There is always more to come, more to reach for, more to give and more to be. Even as we claim perfect love.

Not that I’m there yet. Not that I have been made perfect in love. Yet. Not that I love the Lord with all my heart and soul and mind and my neighbor as myself. I want to. I really do. Sometimes. Now and then. On my better days. OK, the problem is my will. It gets in the way of God’s will in my life. My selfishness and my self-centeredness sometimes get in the way of loving God and loving others.

The way to press on in this life of faith is to stand on these two guides, these two rules, these two commandments, these two descriptions of what a life of faith really is. Any other measure we might want to find is only valuable in that it reflects these two commandments. And even the word commandment gives the wrong impression sometimes. Can you command love? How about these two truths?

These two fundamental truths about how to live life as God intended it to be and as we were created to be, are the center around which everything we are, everything we want to be, and the foundation on which we stand.

We press on to embrace these truths, to make them descriptive of our entire lives. We press on to live as Jesus commands. We press on that our lives might be the living example of Jesus’ greatest tweet. We press on in the strength of these two commandments.

“ . . . love the Lord your God  
with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”  
“ . . . love your neighbor as yourself.”