

Centered in Love

Matthew 22:34-46

Whitefish UMC

October 26, 2008

- † Who or what is the center of your life? If you reply that your answer depends on the moment at which you are asked this question, then you are not alone.
- † Thomas R. Kelly, a Quaker missionary, educator, and scholar wrote:

We are trying to be several selves at once, without all our selves being organized by a single, mastering Life within us. Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves....And each of our selves is in turn a rank individualist, not cooperative, but shouting out his vote loudly for himself when the voting time comes....

It is as if we have a chairman of our committee of many selves within us who does not integrate the many into one but who merely counts the votes at each decision, and leaves disgruntled minorities....We are not integrated. We are distraught. We feel honestly the pull of many obligations and try to fulfill them all....

Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center. Most of us, I fear, have not surrendered all else, in order to attend to the Holy Within.

- † To the Jewish teachers of the Law who confronted Jesus in today's Gospel lesson, determining the center of the 613 laws that they observed was another of the trick questions we heard about last week. So they asked Jesus to choose the greatest of those many laws.
- † Of course they are bent on causing contention among the people. But Jesus replies to his critics without letting himself be baited. He recited the commandments to love God, self, and neighbor, but he went on to say that these commandments are inseparable.
- † In other words, the unity of these commandments is the foundation for all the other commandments of the law and the prophets. That is, do the other laws that we are asked to follow encourage, inspire, equip us to love with God's love—to love God, self, and neighbor as God sees each of these elements?
- † In these days of dramatic economic and political news, how are we as Christians meant to discern the truth of what we hear? Seeking after God's truth often puts us at odds with certain values and practices of our culture. Discerning what is right and true, as well as loving, isn't easy in these days.
- † Thomas Long, a well known preacher and writer says, "To love God and to love one's neighbor. This is the essential message of our faith, these are the central goals in life, and everything can be organized around them. And these two goals form the standard for how Christians talk out in the world, the tests for Christian truth-telling.
- † Christians seek to tell the truth not just to be accurate or to keep themselves from being caught out in a lie. Christians tell the truth in order to increase the love of God and love of neighbor. These are

often hard tests to apply, but they are the yardsticks by which Christians...are measured.”

- † If you’re like me, you are getting tired of professedly Christian politicians insulting one another, as well as their respective followers. They try to categorize their opponents by putting them in their place with innuendo and outright character assassination.
- † Building on more of what Long says, I wonder if Christians indeed aren’t meant to put people in their place. But don’t we have a different idea of “place?” If we say that we believe that all people are created in God’s image, are we not meant to see each person, regardless of their political beliefs or programs, as having been crowned by God “with glory and honor?”
- † In the words of Psalm 8, this is the proper place of human beings, and we ought to use words to put people in their place, their God-given place of value, regardless of who they vote for.
- † God knows we don’t live up to this ideal. Not in society at large. And not even in the church. But we are meant to be a laboratory in which we keep trying to love God, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbors as if that were the center of our scattered and competing selves and priorities.
- † In an increasingly secular and un-churched culture, you hear people say, very often, how it is possible to be a Christian without being a part of a church. Churches, they say, have caused more pain and grief than they ought to.
- † Lest you think that this is a relatively new phenomenon, remember that the beloved Abraham Lincoln held to a similar viewpoint. He

very famously avoided joining any church, which was often commented on in the news.

- † “Of course, in his day, church membership concerned matters of fine theological distinctions. He had trouble giving his assent to long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine, which seemed to him to be what church membership was all about.
- † However, Lincoln was quoted as saying on more than one occasion, ‘When any church will inscribe over its alter as its sole qualification for membership the Savior’s condensed statement of the substance of both the law and the Gospel, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and thy neighbor as thyself’—that church will I join with all my heart and soul.’”
- † Imagine how President Lincoln would be treated for his views in today’s political climate. But more importantly, imagine first a church that held Jesus’ great commandment as its central truth, as the core of its reason for being.
- † Here’s a story that may help. I’m about to head back to the Midwest, where this September record flooding wreaked havoc in several states. In Chesterton, Indiana, a ten-year old boy named Doug and a couple of his friends were playing near the creek after the torrential rains came, and the creek turned into a raging river.
- † This surging water dragged Doug into the current. Doug’s neighbors were home, saw what happened, and instead of screaming like everyone else was doing, Mark Thanos, a high school English teacher, jumped into the churning waters to save the boy.

- † But Mark Thanos was not that good of a swimmer, and when he started to struggle himself, his seventy-four year old father, John Thanos, jumped in after him and tried to help his son. Both father and son drowned, the son trying to save the boy, the father trying to save the son.
- † Ten year old Doug survived. Later that day he clung to his mother's side and cried. "I wish he knew I could swim...I wish he didn't love me that much." Over and over again young Doug cried, "I wish he knew I could swim...I wish he didn't love me that much."
- † What drove a neighbor to jump into raging waters to save a neighbor? What drove an aging father to jump into raging waters to save a son? Love. Love which was inconvenient, unsentimental, and sacrificial.
- † Sometimes having love at the center of your life may cause you to lose the rest of your life, with tragic consequences. But tragedy is not the final outcome. The day after John and Mark Thanos, father and son, drowned in that churning creek, the young Doug and his family visited the newly widowed Victoria Thanos and her own sons.
- † Ten-year-old Doug had made Victoria a home-made cake. Victoria hugged the neighbor boy tightly. She asked if he was feeling better, and she made a fuss over his cake. She then invited Doug and his family to sit down and have something to eat with her boys.
- † They shared stories of Victoria's husband and his father and her own sons. Over the cake that Doug made, they allowed love to be the chairman of their committees of selves that were competing for control over each other.
- † And the grace of love prevailed, because following Jesus, they let love of God, self, and neighbor prevail over anger, bitterness, grief,

accusation, and doubt. Victoria urges her friends that if they are praying for anyone, they are to pray for the little boy Doug.

- † Why tell this story, other than as an example that we might live up to as individuals? Because we as a church have experienced our share of tragedy this fall, and it has tested the core of our beliefs and actions.
- † Two weeks ago, on the Children's Sabbath, you heard our youth speak about what this church means to them. Do you remember what they said? One by one, they told of feeling accepted, valued, loved, and included by this church. They spoke of the strengthened relationships they have found.
- † Week by week, new youth join our gatherings on Wednesday nights. They come because it's fun, but also because being a teenager is hard, fraught with difficult choices and competing values.
- † Figuring out who is in charge of their developing selves is a major challenge. And the same is true for us older folks. And that's why we come to church, too. Because we want love and relationship to be strengthened in our lives, as well.
- † How are we doing? Pretty well, I think, though we are surely not where we want to be. One challenge is to include those who are just experimenting with church in the love that draws us here and that we claim as our center.
- † In the next ten days, you'll hear lots of accusations, challenges, claims of truth, preferred policies. But ask yourself, "What's at the center of all of it?"
- † More importantly though, ask yourself what's at the center of your life? Who is in charge of your committee of selves? If it's not

always love of God, self, and neighbor, join us so that we can learn together to put love in control.

† And give thanks that win or lose on November 4th, love—not the feeling but the action—is what keeps us centered in relationship and truth.

† Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sources:

Stephen P. Bauman, “My Life is My Argument,” www.christchurchnyc.org

Carol J. Allen, “God is Kind,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Leonard Sweet, “The Two Love Laws,” www.sermons.com