

Led by Love
Matthew 22:34–46
Sunday, October 25, 2020

When I was a kid, every Sunday night we would go over to my grandparents' house for dinner. Most weeks, we would have something *really good*; my grandfather would grill burgers or steaks or bbq ribs. But sometimes my grandmother would cook something that I just did not like. So on those weeks that I sat there with a plate of dried out turkey and collard greens in front of me, I just would not eat. And when that happened, my grandmother would do this thing. She would poke out her bottom lip and get a sad look on her face and say, "Patrick, if you don't eat that, you're going to make grandma cry! *If you love me, you'll eat that.*" Even as a 7 or 8-year-old kid, that never worked on me. I would be sitting there thinking, "If *you* loved *me*, you would have made *ribs* tonight!"

I would bet that, in many different ways, a lot of us have had that experience of someone trying to motivate us with *guilt*. And unfortunately, the church is not immune to this, all too often using guilt as a motivator when it comes to stewardship. "*If you love God, you'll give.*" I remember back in my first year as a pastor, when it came time to send out the pledge cards, I asked someone, "What have we been doing in the past for that?" They pulled out a card, and printed across the top of it in big, bold letters was the verse from 2 Corinthians 9, "God loves a cheerful giver!" So don't just *give*, but give with a *smile* on your face! We use stories like the one about the widow putting her two coins into the box as a way of saying, "She gave *all that she had*, so you can give a little more!" I've heard stories about churches that pass the offering plate *multiple times* in a service, and the pastor *will not let them leave* until people give *more*. *If you love God, you'll give.*

I hope by now you know that's not the approach that we take to stewardship. I don't think that's healthy or faithful. In fact, I have long said that we need to rethink the way we talk about stewardship altogether. Too often stewardship is reduced to simply being about *money*. And that's *part* of it, but it's *only* part of it. Stewardship is about *everything we do with everything we have*. It's about the choices we make with our *money*, our *time*, our *gifts* and *abilities*. But it is *also* about our relationships, our natural resources and this planet on which we live, our love, and our forgiveness. It's about *everything we do with everything we have*.

To be a *steward* means to be a caretaker of that which does not belong to you. A steward manages something that belongs to someone else. And so the idea behind stewardship is that our time, our gifts and abilities, our resources, our planet, our relationships, *none of it belongs to us*. They are *gifts* that have been given to us by God – entrusted to us for a brief span of time – and our calling is to care for them in ways that honor and glorify God. This planet on which we live does not belong to us. It belongs to God. So we can't do with it whatever we want. We have to care for it in ways that honor God. My family does not belong to me. They are a gift that has been given to me for a brief span of time by God. And I have to care for them in ways that honor God. This church does not belong to me. It belongs to God. And as this church's pastor – as this church's Elders, Deacons, Trustees, members – we have to care for Christ's church in ways that honor God. Because it's going to be given to someone else after us.

Stewardship is not a *sermon*. It is present in *every sermon we hear*. Because *every single week* we are talking about how we live and use the gifts that God has given us in ways that honor God. Stewardship is not a *campaign* or a *season* in the life of the church. It is a *way of life*. It's about living in that place where we can see everything as a gift and respond accordingly. And stewardship is *never* about *guilt*. Only *one time* in scripture does Jesus say, "If you love me..."

It's in John chapter 14. Jesus says to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." What are Jesus' commandments?

Well, just before Jesus said that, he said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." So Jesus is saying, "If you love *me*, you will love *one another*."

And we hear this in our scripture reading today from Matthew. A Pharisee asks Jesus, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He's talking about the Jewish law, the 613 commandments that God gave to the people of Israel. So which one of those is the most important? Keep the sabbath? Thou shalt not kill or steal? Don't take the Lord's name in vain? Which one of these laws should have preeminence in our lives as people of faith? And Jesus doesn't pick one of the Ten Commandments. He doesn't go with the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love God, love your neighbor. It's so simple, and yet it is so incredibly complicated to live out.

Jesus says that *everything else* depends on these two commandments. Think about that. *Everything else* in our lives depends on our ability to love God and love our neighbor. Everything that we do as Christians, we are called to do as an expression, a manifestation of our love for God and our love for our neighbor. It's like the words of the hymn that we're going to sing in just a little bit:

Though I may speak with bravest fire,
And have the gift to all inspire,
And have not love, my words are vain,
As sounding brass and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess,
And striving so my love profess,
But not be given by love within,
The profit soon turns strangely thin.

Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians, “If I speak in tongues, but do not have love, I am just making noise. If I have prophetic powers and knowledge and understand all the mysteries of life and faith, but do not have love, I have *nothing*. If I give away all my possessions – *if I give my very life* – but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Do we come to worship because “that’s what you’re supposed to do on Sunday,” or because we love God and love our neighbors, and we want to grow in our capacity to love them? Do we read the Bible and pray because that’s what we’re *supposed* to do, or because we love God and love our neighbor, and we want to grow in our capacity to love them? Do I play with my kids because I have a free moment and that’s what I’m *supposed* to do, or because I love them, and this is a way of expressing that love? Do I give to the food pantry or a clothing drive because I need to clean out my house, or because I want to show love for people who are in need? That’s what Paul is getting at.

Paul and Jesus are both saying that love is the driving force behind everything we do. Love for *God* and love for our *neighbor*. But not just love as an abstract concept or emotion, something that exists in our hearts or our heads. Love has to be *lived out*. It has to be made manifest and concrete in our words and actions.

Think of it this way, because we so often romanticize the idea of love or conceptualize it. Think of it in terms of *care*. We can picture that, taking care of someone. We know what *that* looks like. This thing that I am doing, whatever it is, am I doing it as an act of *care* for this other

person – for my neighbor or for God. Am I taking care of them, acting for *their* wellbeing? Am I speaking and acting toward them in ways that show patience, kindness, and truth; in ways that nurture joy and peace and generosity and faithfulness, with gentleness and self-control? In everything that I am doing, am I motivated by love for God and for my neighbor?

So if *love* is the driving force behind everything we do, and stewardship is about everything we do with everything we have, then the driving force behind stewardship is love. Stewardship is about how we use *every gift we have* to show love to God and our neighbor. Am I giving time to God and to my neighbor as an act of love? Am I using my talents and abilities as a way of showing love to God and to my neighbor? Am I taking care of this planet and its resources as a way of showing love to God and my neighbor? Am I giving of *my* resources as a way of showing love to God and to my neighbor? Am I forgiving this person or *seeking* their forgiveness as a way of showing love to God and to my neighbor? Am I doing whatever it is I do because I love?

Next week we will be celebrating Consecration Sunday, a time when we think about how we will use the gifts that we have been given for the furtherance of God’s ministry in the coming year. And we talk in terms of financial giving, but this is *also* about how we will give our time and our abilities. Will we help tend the community garden to feed people in our community who are hungry? Will we serve as Elders, Deacons, or Trustees? Will we serve on a committee? Will we help with the Youth Fellowship or take part in a mission project? Will we read scripture or usher in worship? Will we join a Bible study? Will we make a meal for someone?

The central question behind Consecration Sunday is, “What is God calling me to do?” Jesus tells us that the answer to that is very simple. God is calling you to love God and love your neighbor.

The challenge for us is to figure out what that looks like, what shape that will take. It would be really easy for me to stand up here and say, “In this challenging and uncertain time, we *really need* for you to give financially. We *really need* for people to step up to serve as Elders, Deacons, and Trustees and help *lead* the church through this difficult time.” But what we *really need* right now, what the *world* really needs right now, is *love*. What we need more than anything else is for people to do everything they do as an act of love and care for God and for their neighbor. *That* is what God is calling *all of us* to do. So what will it look like for *you*?