

The Most Important Thing
Mark 12:28–34; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13
Sunday, January 25, 2026

Let us pray: Lord, you transcend place and time. But we pray that you would come *in* to this place and time and speak a word to us that will help us *live* in this place and time, in Jesus' name. Amen.

What is the most important thing in life?

What is the one thing that drives everything else in life? It dictates why we do what we do. Some people would say that *family* and *friends* are the most important thing in life; they dictate why we do what we do. And to a degree that's true. Some people would say *money*, *security*, *success*. Some people would say *power*. Some people would say *happiness*. Some people would say *faith*; that the most important thing in life is your relationship with God. But all of those things are the *result* of *something else*. The fact that you have family and friends is the result of *something else*. Obtaining money, security, success, and power are the result of *something else*. Happiness is the result of *something else*. Faith is driven by *something else*.

What is it? What is the most important thing in life, the most important thing about *you*?

Theologian A. W. Tozer once said that the most important thing about you is what you think about God. That what you *think* about God drives everything else in your life. Our theology drives our actions. But you can *think* all the right things about God. You can study theology and church history and read book after book that help you understand God and faith and *still* not show any evidence of that in your life. You can have orthodox theology and still be a jerk.

So then is the most important thing in life how we *live out* our faith? Is it our *actions*? How we treat other people? Well, even *that* is still driven by *something else*. What is the most important thing that drives everything else we do?

This is essentially the question that the scribe asks Jesus in our reading from Mark. “Which commandment is first of all?” What is the most important commandment, the most important thing that, even if we mess up everything else, we can still get *that* and be okay? And Jesus says, “Love.” Loving *God* and loving your *neighbor*. There is nothing else greater than this.

The fact that you have family and friends is a result of your capacity to love and to *be* loved. Money, security, success, power, those things are driven by what you choose to love. Happiness is the result of loving and knowing that you are loved. Faith is the result of your love for God; it is choosing to *trust* God and *follow* God because we *love* God. What everything in life comes back to is *love*. The most important thing in life is love, and the most important thing about you is your capacity for love; to love and to *be* loved. *That* drives everything you do and how you do it.

This is what Paul touches on in his letter to the Corinthians. He says, “You can have all these spiritual gifts; you can speak in tongues and have prophetic powers and knowledge and faith that can move mountains. But if you don’t have *love*, you don’t have *anything*. You can give away all your possessions, and you can give your very *life*. But if you don’t have *love*, what does it matter?”

And he says that of all the things in life, love is the only thing that *lasts*. You can have *faith*, but one day you won’t *need* faith, because you will be *with* God and see God face to face. The thing

you had faith in will be realized; you will *have* it. You can have *hope*, but one day you won't *need* hope, because the thing you were *hoping* for – *God* – will be there. You can have *love*, and when all is said and done, when this life ends and you go on to live a new life with God, you will *still* have love. God's love for you and your love for God. The *greatest* of these, Paul says, is *love*.

The most important thing in life, the most important thing about *you* is *love*.

So then what is the most important thing about this *church*? That was the question that the Transformation Team started wrestling with two years ago. It's the question that the Session wrestled with last year. What is it that *defines* us as a church? What is our *purpose*? Why do we exist? The Elders wrestled with that question for five months, and the answer that they came to is our new mission statement, vision statement, and core values, which I am *really* excited to get to share with you now.

And just for clarity, a mission statement is *why* we exist. Core values are the things that we value most in our life together. And a vision statement is how we feel God is calling us to live out our mission and values. So it's like, "Because of our mission and because of what we value, here is what we want to *do*." I'm going to share the mission statement and core values with you today, and next week we'll look at the vision.

Our new mission statement, the reason this church exists, our *purpose* is this: ***Reflecting God's unconditional love to all.*** That is the mission of St. John's; it is why we exist. ***Reflecting God's unconditional love to all.*** Let's unpack that a little bit.

First, **reflecting**. The idea here is that it does not start with *us*. We have *received* something from God. We have experienced the love of God in Jesus Christ. Our job is simply to *reflect* that love to others; to give them some small glimpse of what God's love is like. And what is God's love for us like? It is patient and kind, so we reflect that love by being patient and kind with others. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude or irritable or resentful, so we shouldn't be either. It is a *humble* love. God's love for us does not insist on its own way; it doesn't say, "You have to be *this* way or do things *this* way in order for me to love you." This kind of love allows the other to *be*, just the way they are. It doesn't rejoice in *wrongdoing* but in the *truth*. It doesn't rejoice when someone messes up or makes a mistake. It doesn't remind them of it or throw it back in their face. It doesn't keep score. It bears with others. It *believes* others and believes *in* them. It hopes *with* them and *for* them. It endures when things get hard. It *never lets go*.

That is what God's love for us is like. It's not just an emotion, something that we feel in our hearts or our heads. It is *action*. It is found in the way that we speak and act, the way that we treat others. We have *experienced* it, so now we are called to *reflect* it.

Reflecting God's unconditional love to all. **Unconditional.** We did not have to *prove* ourselves in order for God to love us. We did not have to follow all the rules or live up to a certain standard. We don't have to be *perfect* for God to love us. We don't have to *change* for God to love us. God loves us *exactly the way we are*. We are children of God, created in the very image of God. There is nothing we have to do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we *can* do to make God love us less. God's love for us is *unconditional*; without conditions or requirements. We have not *earned* it or *deserved* it. God loves you because God *wants* to love you.

And that is how we should love others. Without condition. Without requiring someone to *change* first. Without making them *earn* it or *deserve* it or *prove* their worth. Other people do not have to be perfect for us to love them. If you're waiting for that, you're never going to love *anyone*. We are called to love them – to be patient and kind and hopeful with them – exactly the way they are, even if they never change. Because *they* are also children of God, created in the image of God. When we look at them, we should see God in them, and we should see *ourselves* in them. There should not be anything they have to do to make us love them more, and there should not be anything they *can* do to make us love them *less*. *We* love them because *God* loves them, and our ability to love them does not *depend* on *them*. It depends on *us*. We have to *choose love*.

So that's *reflecting God's unconditional love*. Who do we reflect it *to*? *All*. All people. *Everyone*. Our friends and family and neighbors. Our enemies. The people who are *easy* to love. The people who are *hard* to love. The people who make us laugh, and the ones who drive us crazy. The people we *agree* with, and the people we *disagree* with. The people who look and sound and think and act like us, and the people who do not. Rich and poor, black and white, conservative and liberal, American and foreigner, immigrant and citizen, gay/straight/transgendered.

We are not called to decide whether someone is *right* before we love them. We do not have to *agree* with them in order to love them. We leave judgment to God, and we simply love, the way that *we* would want to be loved. You might say, "I can't love *this* person, because I think that this aspect of who they are is *sinful*." Okay. But doesn't God love *you* in *your* sin? We don't get to decide who is *worthy* of love.

All people are worthy of love. All people *need* love. All people *are* loved by God. And the way that we love *them* is the way that we love *God*. Our mission, our *purpose* is to reflect God's unconditional love to *all*.

How do we go about *doing* that? That's where we come to our core values. The Elders worked really hard to identify three things that are at the core of who we are and what we do here.

First is ***faith***. We value faith. We seek to grow in our faith and to recognize God's presence in our lives through scripture, worship, music, fellowship, study, and prayer. In everything we do, we want to be constantly nurturing our faith, our ability to trust God and follow Jesus Christ.

Second is ***love***. We value love. All people are welcome here. We are a caring, inclusive, intergenerational community, following Jesus Christ's example to love everyone, to be with one another in difficult times, and to share in each other's joys. We want everything we do to reflect love, and we want to be constantly nurturing our ability to love God and to love one another.

Finally, ***service***. We value service. We are passionate about helping those in need within our church family, in our local communities, across the country, and throughout the world. Led by the Holy Spirit, we are generous with our time, talents, and resources to bring hope to others in tangible, transformative ways. Christ calls us to serve one another. And we want to be constantly nurturing our ability to serve, because when we serve *others*, we serve *God*.

Those are our three core values. Faith, love, and service. That is at the heart of who we are and everything we do here. It always has been. When we are making decisions here, whether it is the Session/Deacons/Trustees making a decision, or any of us making a decision about

something this church should do, those three core values should guide us. We should ask ourselves:

- Is it faithful? Are we trusting God in this thing?
- Is it loving? Does it reflect God's unconditional love to all?
- Does it serve God and others? Or does it serve ourselves?

The most important thing in life, the most important thing about *you*, the most important thing about *us* is *love*. Our *mission* is reflecting God's unconditional love to all. And we *do* that through faith, love, and service. If we do *that*, if we constantly nurture our ability to do that, then no matter what happens in the church or in the world around us, we will be living out God's purpose for us. And, as Jesus says in Mark, we will not be far from the kingdom of God. So let us reflect God's unconditional love to all through faith, love, and service, in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen.