

LOVE GOD
The First in a Three Part Exploratory Sermon Series on
THE PURPOSE OF BEING CHURCH

May 7, 2006 ~ 4th Sunday of Easter

Scripture texts:

**“LOVE God with your heart and soul and strength and mind
and your *neighbor* as yourself.”**
(The Great Commandment, Luke 10:27)

*“God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8)

The Visioning Task Force decided that before we, as a congregation, can begin to create a future vision for Holy Trinity and imagine a strategic plan for the next five years, it is crucial to invite everyone to think about the purpose of being church, our *raison d’etre* – our reason for being a church. We need to ask some questions:

What is the purpose of being church?

What is it that God wants to do in and through the church?

What makes the church different from other organizations and institutions?

What is the business of the church?

Rick Warren has recently written a profound book for clergy and members of local congregations. He titled it *The Purpose Driven Church*. His claim is that the church has a number of biblically based purposes including worship, discipleship, evangelism, fellowship and outreach. He further claims that in order for a church to be healthy and growing in its ministries these purposes find some sort of a balance. For instance, Warren would claim that a church that has fabulous worship services and an extraordinary music ministry but lacks outreach and mission is a church out of balance. Or a church that prides itself on great fellowship and care of its members but lacks an evangelism program that seeks to make disciples for Jesus Christ is out of balance. Church growth, claims Warren, occurs when the purpose of being church is biblical and balanced.

Now we don’t have to create these purposes. We simply need to rediscover them in the Good Book. To do that, we can look to scripture and recall Jesus’ ministry on earth. What Jesus did while he was on earth is a key to what he wants continued in his spiritual body, the church. We can look at the examples of the New Testament churches and learn from them what to do and what not to do. And we can look at the commands of Christ and recall his expectations of us, his followers.

In preparing for this three part series on The Purpose of Being Church I also reread a favorite little book from seminary called *Models of the Church* by Avery Dulles. He wrote the book because he was concerned that Christians could not agree on what the church really is. Like Warren, he grounds his models in scripture and tradition and concludes that worship and sacraments, study and spiritual practices, evangelism and fellowship, mission and service must all find a place in the institution called church and that the administrative structure of the church must be seen as subordinate to its life and mission.

What is the purpose of being church? What is our *raison d’etre*? What IS our business? When pressed to find a succinct, to the point scripture verse that answers these questions and informs us about our purpose, I turned to the Great Commandment. Love God, love neighbor, love self. It’s clear. It’s concise. It’s complete. Loving God includes the church at worship, study and practicing spiritual disciplines. Loving neighbor includes acts of charity and deeds of justice. And loving self includes making disciples, and fostering fellowship and care for one another and for our facilities.

So the Great Commandment is our text for this three part series on The Purpose of Being Church. And today we

will begin with Jesus' command to Love God. Clearly, it is the purpose of the church to offer a setting where we can receive the gift of God's love and services or programs or studies or events that enable us to learn how to love God in return.

Loving God. Look at the 4 yellow beads on your prayer beads. Those are the beads that invite us to reflect on how we, as a church, can grow in our openness to receive God's love and to practice the Love of God in all that we do. Yellow is for the light of Christ, who was and is God's gift of Love to us. Yellow represents the brightness of glory and awe when we experience God's love.

How does the church help us to Love God? I've called these purposes of church
the worshipping church,
the classroom church,
and the spiritually practicing church.

In worship, it is through music and liturgy, the reading of scripture and its interpretation, prayer and the sacraments that we experience the holy. Do any scripture verses come to mind to support worship as a purpose of being church? Remember when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days? In Matthew 4: 8 – 10, Jesus gives Satan a clear message that we are to worship and serve God alone.

“Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor and said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to the devil, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written,
Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.”

Scripture also reminds us that we are to sing our Love for God. In Ephesians 5: 18b – 20 Paul reminds the early Christians

“Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to God in your hearts, giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Yes, worship is definitely a purpose of being church. Some of you noted on last week's questionnaire that it was at a healing service, or while listening to the bells and choir, or during our prayer time of concerns and celebrations, or at the communion rail, or when the candles are lit on Christmas Eve, or at baptisms or weddings or funerals that you have experienced the presence of God and known God's love. It is such a gift to be in touch with the holy!

Similarly, Christian Education is a purpose of the church. On our journey of faith, from cradle to grave, it is the means by which we grow in our understanding of God's love. Wisdom, not the world's wisdom but God's wisdom, is what molds us and recreates us and inspires us as we take our faith out into the workplace and into our families and homes. Proverbs 3: 13 – 18 speaks well about this wisdom.

Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
and in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.

It is only when we take the time as adults to study this wisdom that we are able to make God's word relevant and inspiring for today's 21 century world. Our understanding of what it means to Love God evolves as we, ourselves, mature. In last week's questionnaire, some of you mentioned Disciple Bible Study, the Kerygma Bible Study that we used a number of years ago, the Monday night Women's Group, *The Gathering*, the study groups that preceded

the vote to become a reconciling congregation, and other social issues studies as important church sponsored study groups. Surely our excellent Christian Education for children and youth in this church is a critical purpose for being church. Where else in this world do our children and youth have the opportunity to clarify their values and choices?

Finally it is through worship and study that we get to practice our spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting and the tithing of our financial resources and our time. Is it not through such spiritual practices that we show God our love and give thanks for our blessings? Jesus instructed us on the importance of these practices in Matthew 6: 2 – 6; 16 – 21.

²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your God who is in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by God who is in secret; and God who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So far, I think that we would all agree that the business of the church includes worship and study and spiritual practices. We begin to encounter our differences, though, when we ask the “how to” questions. The worship committee asks how will we design a worship service? Will there be a traditional anthem by the choir or will the Praise Team lead us in singing? Will it be an interactive experience or a service with much silence? And what about a study group? Will it be something that appeals to the intellect or to the emotions? You begin to see the dilemmas that arise.

Marcia McFee, instructor and worship leader in our denomination has helped me understand how our different personalities and our differing neuromuscular patterns in our brain affect how we experience “the holy.” Her claim is that we are all created with a native rhythmic pattern and that these patterns differ as much as do our individual fingerprints. Our experience bears this out. One person goes to a spa to relax and rejuvenate while another’s idea of rejuvenation is a 50 mile bike ride! Yes, we each have a “home pattern” – a way of experiencing the world in which we feel most like ourselves and this pattern is transferable to the way that we best experience “the holy.”

McFee defines four basic patterns that define and categorize our preferred way of being in this world and suggests that these patterns are transferable to worship and study and the way we choose to practice spiritual disciplines. She calls these four kinds of people Thrusters, Shapers, Swingers and Hangers. Her point is that God moves us in many different ways and as a church we need to be sensitive to these differences and learn to live with our rich diversity.

Maybe you’ll discover your “home pattern” as I describe them. Probably you’ll find that part of you can relate to each one.

So... if you move through the world with “things to get done,” making lists and moving with purpose and goals you are a Thruster. You rally for action! You have a strong sense of direction. “Just do it! Go for it!” is your motto.

Theologically, yours is a God of action, a transformational God. Space and color, movement in worship that contribute to the creation of energy patterns would be the way that Thrusters best experience the holy. *We Are Marching in the Light of God* would be a hymn of choice.

Now if you move with reserve and like things to be organized and ordered and if you like to find a way to do something and then repeat it over and over again, you are a Shaper. For you everything needs proper structure and form. When you come to church, you know what to expect and it doesn't change. New hymnals cause you distress. Learning new hymns distances you from "the holy." The preacher belongs in the pulpit. Your God is an eternal, steadfast, enduring God. The hymns should be traditional with familiar music and words like *The Church's One Foundation*.

However, if you love to move from this to that, and are interested in many things, and are energized by interaction you are a Swinger. You love anything and everything that is highly interactive and multidirectional. You are creative and playful and touchy feely and love celebrations. If you are a Swinger, you felt a great loss this morning when you entered the sanctuary and found the Easter butterflies gone and the lilies no longer decorating the cross. (Needless to say, if you are a Shaper, you were relieved to find the sanctuary "normal" once again!) Yours is a God of hope and possibilities, a God who feels the highs and the lows of life itself. *Halle, Halle, Halle* would be a favorite hymn and you would find yourself standing and clapping as you sang.

Finally, if you are one who goes with the flow, one who can simply "be" with others without the need to interact and find energy in meditative environments, you are a Hanger. Yours is the language of being; you are able to go deep and experience the mystery and awe of holiness. You come to church longing for periods of silence and dislike all the words that interrupt your solitude. Your God is One who is ever present at the deepest core of our being. *Jesus, Remember Me* is your kind of hymn.

Thrusters, Shapers, Swingers, and Hangers – such a diversity of rhythms. In order for us to experience "the holy" we need two things – to have our own "home rhythm" affirmed and to utilize many rhythms in order not only to be inclusive but to expand our understanding of God and of who we are called to be as the Body of Christ. We are a polyrhythmic body of Christ whether at worship, or in study or in practicing spiritual disciplines.

So now I'm going to ask the Shapers and Hangers to bear with me because I'm going to ask you to talk with one another in groups no larger than 3. This is the first of many Holy Conversations that we will have this year as we imagine a vision for Holy Trinity. The question that I invite you to ponder and discuss is this: Based on today's sermon, what one or more programs would you like to see implemented in the next 5 years that would encourage and inspire us to LOVE GOD? Think about the models of the worshipping church, the classroom church and the spiritually practicing church. Be aware of your differing "home patterns" as you talk and see how you can be creative with the differences that you share. Please write your idea or ideas on the yellow note card in your bulletin.

As we move through these few weeks of asking the question *What is the purpose of church?* let us pray with our prayer beads and recall Jesus' commandment to us, his disciples. "**LOVE God** with your heart and soul and strength and mind and your **neighbor as yourself.**" So be it. Amen and Amen.