

LOVE NEIGHBOR
The Third in a Three Part Exploratory Sermon Series on
THE PURPOSE OF BEING CHURCH

May 21, 2006 ~ 6th 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)*

Today we conclude the three part sermon series on the Purpose of Being Church. I was glad to hear this past week that folks were talking about their worship experiences and asking questions about the series. Why is Rev. Susan talking about the purpose of being church? Don't we already know why we come to church? Where did she come up with these different categories and models of being church? And what does this have to do with the Visioning Process anyway?

Let me recap the intent of this sermon series. During this coming year we are going to embark on a visioning process that will help us define our identity and set goals for the next 5 years. We're doing this, not because there is anything wrong with the church nor is the church in any kind of jeopardy. We're doing this because we're healthy and growing and we need to figure out how God wants us to spend our time and resources in the next few years. An organization that has a strategic plan is one that is vital and purposeful and that is exactly what Jesus wants the church to be.

But before we can begin to have holy conversations about how we want to be known in the community and set our 5 year goals, it seemed critical to recall the biblical basis for the purpose of being a church. According to Jesus' teachings and example as well as the experiences of the early church as recorded in Paul's letters, there are a number of purposes for being church. And scholars agree that keeping these different purposes in somewhat of a balance makes for a life giving church. My hope is that this sermon series expands our understanding of the purpose of being church and invites us to look at a whole variety of purposes. When we begin to talk about our future, I hope that we'll refer back to these purposes and make sure that our goals are inclusive of them all.

To help us remember the purposes of being church I chose Jesus' Great Commandment as a text. In each of the three parts of this commandment we find purposes of being church. LOVE GOD. The worshipping church, the classroom church and the practicing spiritual disciplines church all contribute to our growing in our love for God and our appreciation of God's love for us. LOVE SELF. The soul winning church, the family reunion church and the church that maintains its facilities are purposes of the church that remind us of the importance of caring for ourselves as the body of Christ. Church is a place where we come to meet Jesus and discover how to live life differently in light of believing in Jesus and being his disciple. LOVE NEIGHBOR. The merciful church that does deed of charity and mercy and the prophetic church that is committed to justice-making are purposes of Christ's church that reach out beyond our doors to others.

Our prayer beads invite us to pray about Holy Trinity and to think about these different purposes. The yellow beads are reminders of how we Love God. Yellow is for the radiant light of God's love. The red beads are reminders of how we Love Self. Red is for the Holy Spirit. It represents Pentecost, the birth of the church, when people of diverse races and cultures were set on fire for Jesus Christ. The blue beads are reminders of how we Love our Neighbor. Jesus modeled both deeds of mercy and acts of justice during his ministry on earth. Blue is a color often associated with Jesus and his mother, Mary. Finally there is a purple bead which is our Jesus bead. It is only with him that we can ponder the full purpose of being a church.

Today we are going to look at what it means to love our neighbor. Let's look first at the word love. Why is the church expected to be a place where love is always active? In 1 John 4: vs. 16 – 21, we are instructed about love.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them.

Love will come to perfection in us when we can face the day of judgment without fear – because our relation to this world is just like Christ's. There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear. To fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love.

We love because God first loved us. If you say you love God but hate your sister or brother, you are a liar. For you cannot love God, whom you have not seen, if you hate your neighbor, whom you have seen. If we love God, we should love our sisters and brothers as well; we have this commandment from God.

Church, then, is a place where we learn to love God and our neighbor. But just who is our neighbor? Jesus, the story teller, is mighty clear about explaining just who is our neighbor when he tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Let's see this story in action this morning. Let me introduce the characters to you. First there is a traveler. This traveler is a good Jew who is en route from Jerusalem to Jericho. Then there are the robbers who beat up on the traveler. There is a Jewish priest who is probably returning to Jericho after serving time at the Temple in Jerusalem. Because he is a priest, he cannot touch a dead or even an apparently dead body because the action would defile him and he could no longer serve as a priest. There is also a Jewish Levite, a member of the tribe of Levi and descent of Jacob's third son. He too could have been on the road having offered his services at the Temple. Like the priest, he is a person of privileged status and would be contaminated if he approached and touched a dead person. Finally there is a Samaritan. The Samaritan is a mortal enemy of the Jews because the Samaritans are descendents of a tribe of people who married the Assyrians following the conquest of Israel in 722 BC. And of course there is an inn keeper who houses the bruised traveler.

Now here the story from Luke 10: 29 – 37 as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. "Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?"

Jesus answered, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?"

And the scholar said "That you love God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence – and that you love your neighbor as well as you love yourself."

"Good answer!" said Jesus. "Now do it and you'll live."

Looking for a loophole, the scholar asked, "And just how would you define 'neighbor'?"

Jesus answered by telling a story. "There was once a traveler going from Jerusalem to Jericho. On route the traveler was attacked by robbers. They took beat up on the traveler and left that poor person half-dead on the side of the road. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw the traveler, he angled across to the other side. Then a Jewish Levite showed up; but also avoided the injured person.

A Samaritan traveling the road came upon the injured traveler and filled with compassion, approached the traveler and gave first aid, disinfecting and bandaging the wounds. Then the Samaritan put the wounded person on a donkey, went straight to an inn and made the traveler comfortable. In the morning, the Samaritan took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying "Look after this person. If it costs any more, put it on my bill and I'll pay you on my way back."

"What do you think?" inquired Jesus. Which of the three became a neighbor to the traveler attacked by the robbers?"

"The one who showed compassion" replied the religion scholar.

Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

Thank you, players, for bringing the story to life for us this morning.

Jesus has high expectations! He suggests that there are no limits to our responsibility as neighbor. We are to be neighbor to all – even if the neighbor is our enemy – even if it means questioning the rules of our religion and the morality of our culture. Being a neighbor means putting love into action.

This story illustrates two very different purposes of being church. It demonstrates the importance of offering mercy and compassion to anyone who is in need and it represents actions that are prophetic. The unjust Jewish oppression of Samaritans is confronted and the system of oppression is changed from exclusion to inclusion.

Let's look first at the church as the body of Christ that offers mercy and charity and care to others. Bringing non perishable food items for the People to People Food Pantry, working with Habitat to provide affordable housing, sending teams to cook and serve meals to the guests at the Salem Mission, collecting items for our sisters and brothers in Nicaragua, sending a mission team to New Orleans, and providing 3 vehicles plus several shipped pallets packed with material aid for the victims of Hurricane Katrina are all acts of charity that Holy Trinity has generously provided. Many of you, in responding to the questionnaire on April 30th, remembered the Vietnamese Refugee families that Holy Trinity received back in the 70's and 80's. Such loving care was given to the families of Tu Van, and Chinh, and Kien. This church has a long history of loving its neighbor locally and globally with deeds of mercy.

But Jesus' story also illustrates the importance of the prophetic church, the church that is committed to doing justice wherever injustice is found. The loving actions of the good Samaritan break down long standing barriers between the Jews and the Samaritans and begin to change a system that oppresses and offends one group of people. The church is called to do justice, to address social sin and structural injustices and it is risky business.

On this Sunday when we celebrate Holy Trinity's status as an inclusive and reconciling congregation, I commend you for being like the good Samaritan to gay and lesbian travelers who for too long have been beaten up – by family, by the church universal, by co-workers and peers – and left by the wayside, bruised and forsaken. It took great courage fourteen years ago for this church to vote to be known as a reconciling congregation in the United Methodist denomination. Such a deed meant taking the risk of losing some members who might disagree with the intention of making this church welcome to all people. But the process and decision offered compassion and care to gays and lesbians who needed a spiritual home that was loving and accepting of all persons.

Little did Holy Trinity know that their decision would become more and more important as time passed. Reconciling congregations are a beacon of Christ's light in our United Methodist denomination. Why just this past year, the Judicial Council, our denomination's highest judicial authority, issued a decision that upheld the right of a pastor to refuse membership to a practicing homosexual. There has been an outcry from the Council of Bishops, from many annual conferences, from the Board of Church and Society and the Reconciling Ministries Network to reverse this decision. The church is to be in ministry for and with all persons! Reconciling congregations become models of inclusivity in this fearsome time in our denomination. We are justice makers, signaling the need for the system to change!

How can our denomination have as its motto "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" when it slams shut the door to anyone who wishes to follow Jesus? John Wesley, founder of the Methodist tradition, insisted on an open door policy and made it his ministry to seek out the oppressed and disenfranchised in his day and age. The hallmark of the church that I joined, now over 35 years ago, was heart and hand, personal holiness and social holiness, love of God and love of neighbor, whoever and wherever that neighbor might be.

Over these past 14 years, Holy Trinity has been blessed with the amazing gifts and ministries of a number of gay and lesbian members of this congregation. It would truly be our loss if this church were not a reconciling congregation that celebrates our diversity and our differences, listening and learning and watching for God's ongoing revelations as we seek to discern what it is God intends for God's church. Thank God we are open to change and new possibilities. Thank God we open our minds and hearts and doors to all who want to know and love and follow Jesus.

The purpose of church is to be both merciful and prophetic – to offer deeds of charity and acts of justice both locally

and globally. Now it is your turn to respond to what it means for us as a church to LOVE NEIGHBOR. I'm going to ask you to talk with one another in groups no larger than 3 and share a Holy Conversation with one another. Today, the question that I invite you to ponder and discuss is this" Based on today's sermon, what deeds or mercy and acts of justice would you like to see realized in the next 5 years as we strive to Love our Neighbor? Think about the models of the merciful church and the prophetic church as you talk with one another. Please write your suggestions on the blue note card that you will find in your bulletin. You will have a chance to turn them in during the offering.

I thank you for your openness to thinking about the purpose of being church. Throughout the coming year, I encourage us to pray with our prayer beads and ask God for guidance in exploring our future. Let us keep Jesus' commandment ever before us, his disciples. And let us find ways to "**LOVE God** with all our heart and soul and strength and mind and our **neighbor as ourself.**" So be it. Amen and Amen.