

Sermon November 1, 2015 Deuteronomy 6:1-9 Mark 12:28-34 "Not Far from God's Heart"

At our Charge Conference yesterday, our District Superintendent, Rev. Ken Kieffer, spoke of folks who helped him grow through life, especially in some difficult times for him. He called these folks "Norm," and suggested that Christians are called to allow ourselves to let God work through our actions, words and attitudes so much that others can discover through us the power of God's love, that God's love for others can be "the norm" for our days.

Today, as we remember those of our church family and also family members and friends who have died this past year and throughout the years, it seems quite appropriate that the appointed scripture lessons so directly tell us what is important to God, what God wants us to do in our lives. The basic message is one we have heard with regularity: "Love the Lord your God with all that you are; and love your neighbor as you love yourself." This is the Bible in a nutshell; the Gospel in two lines; it is also the secret to a full and fulfilling life.

When a person dies, his or her life assessment by those who knew him or her basically pivots on the word "Love." Since my father died several years ago, I remember his love, the many ways he showed my sister and me that he loved us. One, he insisted on dividing his cut glass and silver collections between the two of us himself, setting us down together and going over each piece: "Susan, I want you to have this... Florence, I want you to take this one..." and so on. That was a deep expression of his love for us, even though my sister and I found it uncomfortable at the time. My father took responsibility for choosing, keeping us from arguing about "stuff."

Think of the persons we have named, even silently in our hearts, today. We remember the love, or else we grieve over those who could not love well. Many of you who are here knew Eunice Hewett through the years. When I remember her, I remember the way her eyes would twinkle as she listened to me with eager welcoming. She made a person feel special; she offered her love.

The first commandment, Jesus said, is to love God with everything that we are and have. It's significant, I believe, that this particular scripture is placed right after the theological posturing by the Pharisees and the Sadducees as first the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus over the question concerning paying taxes to the Roman government, and then the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, tried to pressure Jesus about that. So in effect, Jesus turned from their posturing and said, THIS is what really matters, THIS is where God's heart is. If you can grasp these two things, you will close to the kingdom of God. You will be close to the heart of God.

Love the Lord your God; love your neighbor as much as you love yourself, and you will be close.

It's hard. We human beings seem incredibly proficient at making it hard to love each other, and we don't do all that much better when it comes to loving God. I won't list all the stuff that keeps us from loving, because most of us can likely come up with a few things of our own.

Because this message needs to be short today (5 hymns, All Saints, and communion!), I am going to end by sharing a story I shared with some of you a few years ago. It was told to me by a philosopher friend of ours who told it one day as we met for lunch in Preston, CT. It is NOT Gospel, but it does provoke one to really think about Jesus' message and the way we go through life today with the year 2015 fears and pressures.

Once upon a time, there was a decent Christian man who died and went to heaven. When he arrived at the pearly gates, St. Peter greeted him and offered to show him around. Together, they walked down the streets. As they passed one section, St. Peter told the man, "Here are the Muslims." The man was surprised. "Muslims? You have Muslims in heaven? But they don't believe in Jesus!" St. Peter replied, "That is true. But whereas many Christians give God an hour of prayer and worship at best each week, these Muslims pray at least five times every day, bowing down and offering their lives to God. God appreciates their devotion, and so God has made a place for them in heaven."

A bit further down the road, St. Peter said, "Here we have Buddhists." "Buddhists!" the man exclaimed. "The Muslim people at least were children of Abraham, but why are Buddhists allowed in heaven?" St. Peter explained, "Those who follow the teachings of Buddha are people of peace, honoring creation and each other. They seek to live in harmony with all. God appreciates their gentle ways, and has allowed them a place in heaven."

Perplexed, the man continued walking with St. Peter along the streets of heaven. Finally, St. Peter declared, "Here we have the atheists." "Wait a minute!" the man protested. "How in the world can God let atheists into heaven? Atheists don't even believe in God!" St. Peter replied, "You are correct, and this has deeply grieved our Lord. However, many who consider themselves atheists even so act in very loving ways towards their neighbors, tending the sick, educating the poor, reaching out to the downtrodden. The very fact that they do not believe in God means that they also do not expect to receive any reward for their good deeds. They do whatever loving acts they do simply to do good, not because they think they are earning points for an afterlife. God honors this, and so God surprises them with what they did not believe could be possible." (End of story - original source unknown - edited from what was told to me by Ron Phipps)

Whether you find blessing and challenge in this story or take offense from the way it offers strange ideas about heaven that are not at all backed up by the Bible, I hope you won't forget it.

We are called to love God and other people with our intellects, our hearts, our every-day actions, and with whatever we consider to be our riches in life. This means not just play-acting a little bit of niceness to try to make God think we're better than we really are. (I preach to myself here!)

In spite of the fact that we often try to do this, there is really GOOD News for us. The Good News is the promise that even though God sees very clearly the times we do not love God or perhaps other people at all, even though God knows our mixed motives and the flabbiness of our

good intentions, God still claims us as beloved children, children who are thoroughly understood and yet absolutely loved. Jesus Christ came for SINNERS, for us, because God's love is BIGGER and more powerful than our failures to love!! Because of this, we are given what we can never earn: Each of us has a place right in God's own heart! Every day, even when we feel totally overwhelmed and lost, we are not far from the heart of the God who claims us as his own and loves us.

To finish this message, we will sing # 2218 in *The Faith We Sing*, proclaiming with our voices the claim and promises of God as God tells us: You are Mine.

May we receive this promise and live in response to it. Amen.