

“Something Remarkable Happens”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Matthew 22: 34-40 and Deuteronomy 6: 1-9

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.

With all your soul

And with all your might.

Keep these words in your heart.

(Deuteronomy 6: 5-6)

Most people haven't spent a lot of time studying the book of Deuteronomy. In fact, most Christians do a wonderful job of avoiding the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Old Testament), rendering it full of judgment and a vengeful God. While there are scriptures that support that, ignoring the Hebrew Bible comes at our detriment as everything Jesus talks about is based in his classic Jewish faith. These scriptures from Deuteronomy, “known as the Shema...lay bare the essence of what God is asking of those who worship God. Not only here, but also in the gospels many generations in the future what stands out is the centrality of love in the fulfillment of covenant. (John C. Dorhauer, *The Centrality of Love: A Reflection for Stewards*)” While we explore the centrality of love, I would hope you would walk away with the idea...the feeling...the trust...that faith is best lived out from a place of love, rather than fear. In fact, to “fear” God in our scriptures is better translated to “know” God. No matter how you slice it, love is the primary starting point both for God...and by command...for God's people. And when we do all, we do from a place of love, something

remarkable happens to us that is more beautiful than anything we can imagine. It's completely opposite of what a faith built in fear brings out in us.

In his commentary on this passage, Rev. Dr. John C. Dorhauer, former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, writes, "It is hard to imagine a more impactful moment than the one unfolding here in Deuteronomy 6. After escape from enslavement, a generation in exile, and the discovery of the promised land Israel stands on the threshold of a future they could not have imagined possible just a short while ago. They are in the process of shaping covenant with the Creator and Liberator. Having been given directives about what behavior would and would not be acceptable, Moses now addresses the community and speaks the words every faithful covenant partner would enshrine upon their doorstep forevermore."

Rev. Dorhauer goes on to tell us that, "It doesn't take a great deal of imagination at this point to recall the scene in the gospels where Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was. As every good Jew of his or anytime would know, it would be: Love God fully and completely. Jesus would add to that this second command, saying it is not far from it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39). The entirety of the law can be summed up in those two covenant promises: Love God, and love neighbor."

For those of you who have been a part of the church for any length of time, or who have read your Bible at all, I'm sure I haven't surprised you yet. Perhaps you're even fighting a yawn as this is old news. We have been taught for generations to love God and love neighbor. The problem isn't in the knowledge of these being the greatest commandments,

it's how they have been applied. Throughout the centuries, people have gotten caught up in the minutiae of the law, while missing the point. In Dorhauer's commentary, he speaks of how he was taught to referee soccer. He was not taught to remember every rule perfectly, but instead to keep the game fair. It's a shame that in so many ways we have lost this notion of how to referee sport. We get into massive arguments over the simplest of rules while missing the big picture about whether or not both sides are being treated fairly. Don't get me started on the rest of our culture, which is also so often caught up in minutiae that we miss the larger picture of what is right, what is fair, and what is good.

Dorhauer goes on to explain that Jesus is essentially supplying the same principle to faith that he was taught to as a referee. "Don't allow the legal manipulators and doctrinal authorities to worry you or scare you into a life of discomfort and dis-ease before your Creator. Think of God and the application of God's law less as obstructions or hurdles or mandates or lists or limits that can get so dense you forget what is or isn't required and worry whether or not you have alienated yourself from God. Think only about this: is what you are about to do or say, not do or not say, the most loving response you can offer? If yes, you have fulfilled the law." Another way to put it is, "don't think about God as the judge you must fear, but as the parent you love, and who loves you."

This carries over into how we think about our stewardship. Yes, we are called to think about the gifts we give of time, talent, and treasure to the church. Nothing is wrong with that. The problem again is the beginning point. In my upcoming newsletter article, I make the same point that I'm making this morning. The starting point for considering our gifts is the same as the starting point for anything else we do. If we start from a place of

love, of joy, of celebration, of relationship...pick your word...rather than guilt, shame, obligation, responsibility, duty...pick your word...something wonderful happens: our giving of our time, talent and treasure becomes something we do joyfully and lovingly, rather than begrudgingly or based in fear. No one is coming after you if you don't serve on the committee. No one is going to shake you down for a gift. Instead, we are called to reflect upon our relationship with God and with this church and ask ourselves if this is something good. And if it is, how might I share who I am with this place, with the world and ultimately with God. Could you imagine going to a committee meeting with joy? Can you imagine laughing at the committee meeting? Can you imagine offering an idea or a gift or something else that you are too afraid to offer now because of your fear of judgment? I can't guarantee that we'll do everything everyone wants to do, but I know that if ideas, dreams, hopes, talents, gifts, finances...whatever...are withheld then we can guarantee that there will be no joy here.

In other words, "Giving can become either obligatory or mechanical. We can too easily detach our giving from the values we treasure so deeply. We can reduce our contributions to the equivalent of paying the heating bill or paying down our mortgage. We can feel like our offering is little more than a payment for services rendered or a duty required of us that we are conditioned to continue out of either guilt or obligation (Dorhauer)." Doesn't that sound like fun?

OR...and this is a big OR...we could start by considering our gifts of time, talent, or treasure to the church by starting with a "reminder to yourself about what the mission of the church is. Actively and prayerfully reflect on why that mission matters to you. Think

about the ways it has made a difference in your life or about how it matters to the community you live in. Invite yourself to consider how it is in the past year this church has blessed you, comforted you, or transformed you.” In other words, what do you love about this place and these people? Dorhauer reminds us that, “something remarkable happens when we center love in the art of the faithful stewardship of our time, talent and treasure.”

Just like our faith is better informed by operating from a center of a God of love, so is our giving also better informed by operating from a center of a place built on love. I didn't say that our church was the perfect place of love. I know that there have been hurts along the way. True love often brings some pain with it. And only God can provide perfect love. At the same time, you are here because something good is here. Someone or something, or several someones or somethings are good here. You have felt love here, or you're new and find that this is someplace different from a lot of churches. Not a lot of churches today have the stated goal of “becoming the best versions of ourselves possible,” or “doing what is ours to do,” or “loving just a little bit more like God does” or even embracing the notion that perhaps the best name for Jesus Christ comes from a Native American translation of the Bible in which Jesus is called “Creator Sets Free.” To the best of our ability, we gather here not to place more burdens on people who are already burdened, but to instead put people in touch with a God who began the world with the breath of love and continues to breathe love into and through it. Not every church in America today has those values. That is up to them. Some can get caught up in the minutiae of certain rules.

But here, we aim for something called Shema:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.

And with all your soul

And with all your might.

And...

Love your neighbor as yourself.

And if we can do that, then surely something remarkable will happen. When love is at the center, the whole world changes. We have been sent for good. We have been sent to love. To the best of our ability. With grace as our only salvation. And true freedom as our only hope.

May God be glorified by the way we love the world...just a little bit like God loves it and everyone and everything in and on it.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.