

*World Communion Sunday*

***Do Unto Others: #5 “Love”***

Matthew 22:34-40; I Corinthians 13:1-13

Sunday, October 6, 2024

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

*Our faith calls us beyond the divisions of our world to grapple with the hard, and messy work of loving each other just as God has loved us.*

Jesus’ words, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31) have guided us this month. We’ve named kindness, compassion, humility, respect as some of the ways we overcome our political and ideological divisions. The idea, as Marcia McFee has written, is to go beyond obliterating one another to discover the beautiful “purple” space that emerges as blue blends into red. “The purple space,” she writes is where we cultivate kindness, compassion, humility, respect, and love for one another and for the good of all the world, no matter what.”

It’s a beauty we see in fall as the trees begin to change. Golden hues emerge, transforming our physical landscapes. Our prayer this World Communion Sunday is that love might be able to transform the landscapes of our hearts.

We pray for the power of love to change hearts and minds.

We pray for the power of love to sustain us in these next thirty days before the election.

We pray for the power of love to defeat the selfish, cowardly desires of those masked protestors who unfurled flags of hatred, racism, and anti-Semitism yesterday over Interstate 64 at Mason Road. Make no mistake: these protestors, who carried signs that read “America for the white man” choose to unveil their hatred the day after the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah.

O Lord, we pray for your peace.

We pray that love might reach the hundreds of thousands of persons and countless places in the southeast impacted by Hurricane Helene last week. One of those places, of course, is Montreat, NC, a Presbyterian conference center and a space special to so many of us.

Montreat suffered catastrophic flooding. The town continues to be without power or running water—like so many in Western North Carolina.

This is what is at stake as we think about Jesus' words to "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Today we look at the way love shapes our actions—not love as an expression of sentimental affection, not love as self-centered narcissism, but love as commitment, love as an outward action that reflect God's steadfast care.

This is where our texts lead us this morning. Last week, I suggested that the church ought to spend more time listening to Aretha Franklin sing, "R.E.S.P.E.C.T." This week, we add Tina Turner to the mix, listening as she cries out to us, "What's love got to do with it?"

Our texts take us to the place where we know love is so much more than a second hand emotion.

In Matthew, Jesus is undergoing cross examination by his opponents. He is nearing the end of his ministry, standing within the temple. His opponents are searching for anything that can become an allegation against him: they have tried asking him about taxes, about theology, and now the law. "Which commandment is the greatest?" they ask him. It is a trick question, of course. There were more than 600 commandments and elevating one above the rest would allow critics to pounce on him even further. But Jesus leaves no room for debate. He responds by first quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

These are the words of the Shema, a critical part of Jewish worship which was (and is) recited several times a day. Jesus anchors his response in the command to love God, but quickly follows up by reciting Leviticus 19:19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Leviticus 19 spells out the obligations we have to the neighbor, to the poor, to immigrants. Jesus' words are clear and focused: to truly love God is to be accountable to God on two levels. First, we honor God with our worship, our hearts, and our whole selves. Second, we allow that love to take shape through concrete expressions.

Paul's words convey very similar understandings. We read these most frequently at weddings, but the truth is that Paul has a very different audience in mind. Paul is not writing to two star-crossed lovers planning their wedding, but to a bitterly divided congregation. And their divisions are deeper than debates over sprinkled versus chocolate donuts on Sunday morning.

The Corinthians have become a divided church. They have allowed individual preferences to be elevated over the functioning of the body. We mentioned last week that this was a community where the individualism reigned supreme. Their church did not sing “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” They preferred the Burger King anthem, “Have it Your Way” or maybe even Frank Sinatra, “I did it my way.”

Paul, however, points them in a different direction. He calls it the “more excellent way,” a way built on the serving love of Christ. Here Paul enlists the church to overcome its selfishness and narcissistic focus on the self for the sake of love working in community. What Paul is aiming at is that the church would become a community where our hearts are shaped by practices of love. It is, says Charles Campbell, like the work involved in becoming a great musician. “Great musicians have a vision they seek to express through their music, but that vision becomes a musical reality only after hours and weeks and years of constant practice—so much practice that the playing comes naturally.<sup>1</sup>”

Paul’s words cut across our hyper-individualistic tendencies. Our call, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said so beautifully, is to seek community. “Let the one who is not in community,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “beware of being alone.”

I read an intriguing story the other day told by Tessa Pinkstaff, a Lutheran pastor and spiritual director. Last year Pinkstaff and others from Luther Seminary in Minneapolis traveled to Germany to spend time researching Bonhoeffer’s life and legacy. Pinkstaff recounts visiting Berlin’s Olympic Stadium where Black American athlete Jesse Owens won four Gold medals in the 1936 Olympics. Owens was the most successful athlete at the Berlin Olympics, which was, of course overseen by Adolph Hitler.

As her group toured the Olympic stadium, they were led to the site of the former “Führer’s Box,” where Hitler was sitting when Owens won. Owens’ athletic abilities dismantled Hitler’s theories on white supremacy, and made headlines around the world. Pinkstaff says that standing in that space created vague feelings of discomfort and a sense of the surreal.

Pinkstaff happened to be visiting the stadium during a particularly busy time. Not only had it been the site of a rock concert the night before, the day they were visiting was also the

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Campbell, [1 Corinthians](#), ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher, First edition., *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 213.

closing of the International Special Olympics games. Her tour guide laughed about being overworked, but then leaned forward to say something remarkable. He said to her:

The guide suddenly became serious, and his change of tone caught my attention. “You know what I like about the Special Olympics?” he asked me. It sounded almost like a confession, and I found myself leaning in expectantly. “It’s about *people*,” he said. “The athletes of the regular Olympics are like professional superstars,” he said, “but these athletes are *human*. They’re just people. And these games cultivate that.” I could hear the awe in his voice and see it reflected on his face.<sup>2</sup>

The comment led her straight back to Bonhoeffer’s commitment to create loving communion and fellowship. He had taught widely on the idea of how our status as God’s beloved calls us to be an inclusive, loving community. “Our personhood matters,” she said, “and God invites us to truly see one another as the complicated, messy, and beautiful creatures that we are. We must never lose that. Our faith, and the fate of this world, depend upon it.”

This is the more excellent way which Paul describes. This is the essence of loving God and our neighbor: a way that is often messy and complicated, but that calls us to strive to show the power of God at work in our world. Love is not some sort of warm feelings, but, as Douglas Hare says, “a rather stubborn, unwavering commitment.”

Perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves in these days leading up to the election is not only which candidate will win or which one will lose. Perhaps, as Paul suggests, we might open ourselves to “a more excellent way.” It’s worth considering. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> See <https://faithlead.org/blog/the-urgency-of-loving-others/>