

“To Love”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
October 23, 2011

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:34-45)

Happy birthday, Church! Yes, we are 141 years old today! It was on October the 23rd, 1870, that some of the first settlers of Oak Ridge, now Oak Park, who had been worshipping in people's homes, were formally organized as a church. Three years later, in 1873, the ground was broken and the church cornerstone laid on Lake Street near Forest Avenue. We were the first established congregation to settle in this area. The church was providing growing and thriving Christian ministry in our community, when, five decades later, in 1923, lightning struck the church building, and subsequent fire burned it to the ground. Yet, people of the First Church rose up to the challenge! About three and a half years later, on November 22, 1925, they were able to dedicate this beautiful sanctuary, in which we now worship. Thanks be to God!

141 years as a church, 86 years at the current location is cause for celebration! I think we can be, and should be, proud of the great legacy on which we stand! I personally feel greatly humbled to stand in this awesome pulpit. What an honor, what a privilege! What exciting time and place to be a church together!

Imagine all those faithful people who have gone through this church in the past 141 years - their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and trials. Through it all, they stayed together as a church, the body of Christ, witnessing to the Gospel of our Lord, keeping the message of hope and life alive. And we are here today, with grateful hearts, rejoicing and celebrating, and also determined to do our utmost, not just to keep things going, but to build up and expand, to make our tradition richer, deeper, more vital, and more vibrant.

It is at a moment such as this that the Church puts before us a familiar, and yet, highly significant and challenging lesson. It was in Jerusalem, during the closing days of Jesus' life. A lawyer, or in today's language, an academically trained theologian, asked Jesus: "*Teacher, which commandment in God's Law is the most important?*" And Jesus said to him: "*'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*"

Love God, love your neighbor. Beautiful words, are they not? I am sure that most of you have heard this passage more than once. And I am sure that most of you agree with Jesus, that these two are the greatest commandments of all, right? Yes, we all agree. And yet, I do not think that the

question, or the challenge, here is whether we agree or not. According to Jesus and in the biblical tradition, love is not a doctrine or a belief, to which we need to give a mental or intellectual assent. According to Jesus and in the biblical tradition, neither love is simply about some warm, fuzzy feelings, which we often describe as beautiful. Rather, it is a commandment, something we are commanded or ordered to do, something that engages our mind and will, as well as our heart and soul. In one word, it is a commitment, a stubborn and unswerving commitment. It is a way we freely choose to live our lives, sometimes despite how we feel, sometimes even though we do not fully understand.

To be Christians, my friends, is serious business. When we are Christians, we cannot live our lives cheaply, carelessly, and selfishly. When we are Christians, we turn our lives, toward God on the one hand, and toward other people on the other, stubbornly and without reserve. When we are Christians, we love, through thick and thin, ups and downs, sometimes despite how we feel, sometimes even though we do not fully understand.

This is what the people of the First United Methodist Church of Oak Park did in the past 141 years. They loved their Lord, and they loved their neighbors, with all their hearts, with all their souls, with all their might and mind. Many gave their time, talent, and treasure, so freely and so joyfully, setting a high spiritual standard for us to follow. This sanctuary in which we now worship is in itself a witness. Without the believers' sacrificial giving, I do not think that we would be worshiping here right now.

Thus, we celebrate today. We celebrate 141 amazing years of love and loyalty. And in our celebration, I remember one saint I had the privilege of knowing in the beginning of my tenure as a pastor here in our church. You will hear more from Ms. Laura Kliewer, the Board President of West Suburban PADS in just a few minutes today, but our church has been serving as a local shelter site since the inception of the homeless shelter program in our community twenty years ago. I was not there when the program was brought into the community and into our church, but I know that had it not been for one of our saints, Ken Johnson, our partnership with PADS would not be what it has been. I am sure many of you remember him. To bring possibly suspicious neighborhood residents on board, I hear that Ken went door-to-door, visiting every single home within a 10 block radius of the church. When the program was brought in, Ken was here, at the church, every Thursday evening. For fifteen years, until he died four and a half years ago, every Thursday evening, including Thanksgiving Day, Ken was here to serve his homeless neighbors. Betty, his wife, had no other choice than to plan her family Thanksgiving dinner around the PADS program. Ken loved his Lord; Ken loved his neighbors, with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his might.

What an honor and privilege to be a part of such a great tradition, such a great church! We love this beautiful sanctuary. We feel truly blessed that we can worship here. But, we know that we are not in the historic preservation business. We are so proud of our historic organ and our magnificent music ministry. But, we know that we do not serve music. We are not in the concert hall business. We cherish the warm fellowship of our congregation. But, we know that we are not a social club. Our business is to love God and love our neighbors, with all our heart, all our souls, all our minds, all our might!

In our Old Testament lesson today, we read how Moses laid his hands on Joshua, the son of Nun, and how Joshua was filled with the Spirit that he may continue Israel's tradition of faith.

This, my friends, is the choice we are invited to make freely on this day. This, my friends, is the commitment we are asked to joyfully make on this day. Are we willing to be Joshuas here and now? Are we willing to be filled with the Spirit and continue the great legacy of love and loyalty we inherited? Will we love our God and our neighbors with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, all our might, as did our forebears of faith? Will we? Let the church respond with a resounding Amen!