

“Love of My Life”

Sermon – October 29, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

This past week my wife Helen and I were taking our granddaughters on a walk behind the Carriage House apartments off Norton Avenue here in Clinton. As we were walking, I pointed to an apartment in the New Carriage House apartments and said, “That’s where I lived when I first moved here from Ohio after college.”

Then further down I pointed to the parking area behind the second Old Carriage House apartment building and said, “That’s where I first saw Grandma as we were both walking up to an apartment for a bible study class. And I thought, ‘Wow! There’s a woman I want to get to know better!’”

Then we told them about our courtship and our first kiss on the steps of the Alexander Hamilton on Park Row.

They were almost interested in the story until I said, “Grandma is the love of my life” and we kissed. At which time they said, “Ooo! Yuck!” Kids today have no sense of romance.

In our modern culture today, we can’t help but link romance to love, but that evolved out of the Middle Ages. In fact, the word “romance” comes from Old French where it meant a story of the adventures of a knight or hero and designed principally for entertainment.

And because it was told in the common tongue—that is, a language derived from Rome as opposed to Latin—it was called a “romance.”

You could say it was a tale as old time.

But as today’s scripture passages show us, true love is much more than a story.

Like the past couple of Sundays, we are still in Matthew 22, which takes place Tuesday of Holy Week. After their aristocratic rivals, the

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as Sadducees, had been silenced by Jesus, the Pharisees took what would be the final shot at Jesus.

The Pharisees were not priests or part of the religious hierarchy. In fact, they were the interpreters of the law and had positioned themselves as advocates for the people. But they promoted practices, such as the purity laws, that were at odds with the interests of many ordinary people and actually worked against them.

Hence, one of them poses the question to Jesus, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

If they can get Jesus to admit that the commandment to love God was, in fact, the greatest commandment, they can claim that they have been right all along and silence Jesus. If he refuses to admit that it was the greatest commandment, they can accuse him of sacrilege.

Once again, Jesus shows them it is not an either/or but a both/and.

He quotes the commandment from Deuteronomy 6:5—Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind—and rightly calls it the first and greatest commandment.

To love with the heart is to love with emotion.

To love with the soul is to love with the essence of the self.

To love with the mind to be fully involved with all intelligence, knowledge, and discernment.

In other words, it is with your whole being that you love God. God is the love of your life.

But Jesus does not stop there. He says, in essence, “But wait—there’s more! A second one is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

This comes from Leviticus 19:18.

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While “love God” is one that all readily agree is the first and greatest commandment, “love your neighbor” is in the middle of commands in Leviticus. Jesus’ brilliance is to identify the second most important commandment out of the 613 *and* to couple it with the first.

Jesus saw that “love your neighbor” was the consequence of “love God.”

Loving your neighbor was the ethical implication and expression of loving God. You can’t have one without the other.

Jesus’ combines two teachings of the Torah in a new and distinctive way but consistent with rabbinical thought.

In fact, a few decades after Jesus, renowned sage Rabbi Hillel paraphrased Leviticus 19:18 for a non-Jew, saying, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is all the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go study.”

And if you do study, you will see that biblical love is not passive. It is not just about being nice and doing good things.

Biblical love is not passive emotion, but active mercy. It is marked by patience and generosity both acts generated by the one who loves. In short, loving is a choice, not a feeling.

And that choice can be “tough love.”

Jesus tells the Pharisees that “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The Law requires righteousness as an expression of commitment to God’s will. The prophets demanded justice for people at the margins.

Righteousness and justice are intrinsically connected and are predicated upon being in right relationship with God and with fellow human beings. One cannot be in right relationship with God unless one does

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everything possible to be in right relationship with one’s neighbors as well.

Don’t believe those who tell you they love; believe those who show you they do.

Too often in the church, “love” is used as an excuse to take the path of least resistance instead of the path of excellence. When telling the truth would be uncomfortable, we practice equivocation and call it “love.”

While we are called to pray in situations of oppression, our prayers seeking justice for the oppressed should become a catalyst for action rather than a substitute for action

That means confronting—but also engaging—on issues that affect our neighbors as though they affect us. We must stand up to the politics of hate, discrimination, and de-humanizing of people—particularly when it is done in the name Christ.

That is a challenge because you can seem like a voice crying in the wilderness, but you are called to try whether at home or abroad. For the love of your life should be your love for the life of others.

We note on this Reformation Sunday that our Presbyterian Book of Order says, we are “a church reformed, always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.” As Jesus shown light on being inclusive rather than exclusive, let us consecrate ourselves to do the same with our hearts, our souls, and our minds—with our whole being. For a church reformed is a church of love.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.