"In Good Faith"
Sermon – October 25, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

Our Abolitionist Roots. That was the talk that Steve Smits from Westernville gave to about 18 of us at the Kirkland Town Library this past Thursday. Though I've heard most of it before, I still find it fascinating and it's always good to get a refresher.

As I've mentioned before when announcing the program in previous weeks, what is fascinating is the complexity of views and approaches on abolition in antebellum America. The Presbyterian church reflected these complexities to the degree that it broke up into multiple denominations with some reuniting eventually and new ones spinning off.

Yet at the abolitionist talk Q&A, Mother Joanna Benskin from St. James Episcopal Church pointed out that while the Presbyterians were vociferously arguing and breaking up into different denominations, the Episcopal Church strove for unity over conflict and so they did not deal with the social issues of the day, which has led to other problems. Her point was as painful as conflicts are, avoiding conflicts has its own price.

We are reminding of that point as we commemorate Reformation Sunday today with Martin Luther's attempt for the church to address abuses that he saw. He wanted reform not revolution, but ended up starting up a whole new branch of Christianity of Protestantism. But that led to devasting religious wars as well as hundreds of denominations with different theologies and polities. Hardly what Jesus wanted.

So how do we as followers of Christ follow Paul's instruction to the Phillipians, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind"?

Let's look at today's gospel lesson from Matthew 22:34-46 for some guidance.

The first part you've heard many times. The Pharisees test Jesus on which of the 613 commandments in the Hebrew bible is the greatest. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" He immediately couples with it Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Then he says these are the foundation for everything else.

To borrow from Professor Raj Nadella from Columbia Theological Seminary, while the first commandment represents the vertical dimension of one's faith (human-divine relationship), the second commandment represents the horizontal dimension (human-human relationship). The second commandment is comparable to the first in emphasis and significance.

The quick succession and the manner in which Jesus states the two commandments highlights a complementary and symbiotic relationship between the two. The second builds upon the foundation of the first but the first manifests itself through the second. While the second is built upon the first, the first is not complete without the second. Loving our neighbors is, to a great extent, an act of loving God in whose image the neighbors are made. One cannot claim to love God unless one does everything in one's capacity to love one's neighbors.

The Pharisees don't disagree. Some other great rabbis before and after Jesus basically said the same thing. To borrow from Zina Jacque, Board Chair of the National Senior Communities, the failure has never been

informational. The failure is always somewhere between the knowing and the doing, in the space where we understand perfectly what love requires and find ourselves, quietly and repeatedly, unable to deliver it.

Thomas Aquinas defined love as *velle bonum alicui*—to will the good of the other. Not to feel warmly toward the other. Not to tolerate the other. To actively, structurally, sacrificially orient your will toward the flourishing of another person.

But Aquinas understood something else as well. The will cannot orient itself toward the other if the self is still crowding the center. You cannot will the good of someone you have quietly decided is beneath you. You cannot love without first making interior room for the other person to matter as much as you do. That interior making-room has a name. It is called humility.

This is what the commandment assumes and what we persistently skip. We try to go directly to love without first passing through humility, and we wonder why the commandment doesn't hold. We agree with it on Sunday and violate it by Tuesday, not because we are hypocrites, but because we have not done the interior work. Humility is not a spiritual nicety that lives alongside love. It is the structural foundation without which love, in the full Thomas Aquinas sense, cannot be built.

To illustrate the point—in admittedly abstruse way—Jesus then turns the tables and asks the Pharisees, "Whose son is the Messiah?" They answer "Duh, the Son of David." Then Jesus presses. He quotes from Psalm 110, which they all believed was written by David, saying, ""<u>The</u> Lord said to <u>my</u> Lord, "Sit at my right hand."" What the Pharisees understood

that may be lost on most of us is that "The Lord" refers to God and "my Lord" refers to the Messiah.

This means that David himself is saying that the Lord God told "my lord"—that is, the Messiah—to sit at the right hand of the God. Yet, if the Messiah is to be a descendant of David, you would not anticipate David describing him as "my lord"—the father would not be expected to cede such authority to his offspring. Thus, Jesus' argument goes, the Messiah—Christ—is both a hereditary son of David and greater than David.

The Pharisees go silent. They have no answer.

Jesus is pointing out that David, the king, the giant-slayer, the man from whose line the Messiah would come, looked at his own descendant and said: "My Lord." He bent the knee to someone he could have claimed superiority over. He oriented his will toward the greatness of another rather than protecting his own precedence.

David demonstrated the humility that makes love possible. And the Pharisees, who know the commandment perfectly, cannot answer the question because the question is asking them to do the same thing David did: to subordinate themselves to someone they did not expect to be above them.

They cannot do it. Not because they don't know the commandment. Because they haven't done the prior work of humility.

The same has been true throughout history. In our country alone, the issues that have divided the church and spawn all these denominations are largely cultural: slavery and racism, women's roles and rights, gender and sexuality, nationalism and politics. Despite many who

sincerely believe in good faith that their views are justified biblically, fundamentally all these issues involve those in power keeping it both to preserve the world they have and to control "others", those they deem who are different. It is a tribal attitude versus one of community. It is the fear that being more inclusive is lowering standards as opposed to lowering barriers. For any one denomination or church to think they've got all the answers is pretty arrogant. For good faith we must be continually allow the Spirit to open our hearts, souls, and minds of how to better love all of God's children.

Jesus gave the Pharisees the commandment. Then he gave them the example. Love God. Love your neighbor. And remember that you cannot do either without first doing what David did: humbling yourself before the Lord, who is greater than your own lineage, your own tradition, your own very correct answers. Humility is the prerequisite for love to flourish. This love is far from passive. It is the active response of the faithful person to the love of God.

So let us go forward in good faith loving with our heart through generosity to God's people; loving with our soul by worshiping God and praying for our neighbors and ourselves; loving with our minds by studying God's Word and letting it correct us and enlighten us; and loving with our actions and our deeds.

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