

Good early Sunday morning from a very cool hill in Rockport.....

Well, we're going to give it a try again this morning – worshiping in person, downstairs in Leach Hall at the church!

If you would like, you can print off at home a copy of the bulletin I've put together for this morning and bring it with you to church. But, if you don't have a printer at home, you won't really need a bulletin in your hand for the service. I'll copy it below, after these words and the sermon.

We need to keep paper touching to a bare minimum, and NO touching of one another, no singing, no hugging, no coffee hour sharing of food and coffee.... and **we need to wear our masks. If you forget yours this morning, one of our deacons will gladly provide you with one as you enter the back door.** We'll plan to gather for only thirty to forty minutes. We have learned that what makes the difference in the spread of Covid-19 is time and distance – the amount of time we spend together and how close we are to one another, *and* whether we are wearing masks or not.

I know these seem like extreme restrictions, but we've learned what has happened at churches where all these precautions and restrictions haven't been followed. The situation at the church in Brooks is the latest example of how dangerous gathering together can be! Parishioners and preachers have ended up with the dreaded virus, and some have died. I know that sounds harsh.... We're living through a very harsh time of a public health crisis.

I do hope we can continue to meet in this way at least every other Sunday for the foreseeable future. BUT, the situation with the virus in our area will dictate whether that will be possible or not. Stay tuned each week! We will abide by the guidelines of the Maine CDC and the Governor. I will continue to send out my daily meditations (almost daily!) and my "Sunday words" and worship service and sermon on line. I will continue to post my sermon "done live" on my Facebook page, freerangepastor, and Margie will post it on the church's Facebook page.

I know many of you will continue staying home on Sunday mornings rather than coming to church in person. Please know that is an entirely appropriate and wise decision, especially if you are "of an age" and/or are compromised healthwise in any way.

To say that we are living through a very stressful time for many reasons is a gross understatement. BUT, this, too, shall pass. We will get through this. How do I know that? The Bible tells me so.....

Blessings to each one this chilly Sunday morn..... Susan

“You shall love....”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, October 25, 2020
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 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 neighbour 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.” Jesus 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 22:34-46

Will you pray with me? Loving God, we hear a familiar message this morning – that we are to love you and our neighbor, and that those two are the greatest of all your commandments. Help us to reflect upon your desires for us again, O God, as if for the first time. For we continue to fall short in our living out of these commandments as you would have us do. Amen.

Hear these words of the Hebrew Sh'ma, the Jewish prayer that Jewish children are taught, and it is recited several times a day by devout Jews. It begins “*Sh-MA Iss-ra-EL, add-o-NIGH el-oh-HEY-noo, add-o-NIGH eh-CHAD.*” Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand,

fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” This prayer is from the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, verses 4-9.

In some ways I suppose we could compare the Sh'ma, to the Lord's Prayer for Christians. Jesus, as a faithful Jew however, lived and prayed the Sh'ma. It is at the heart of our gospel passage from Matthew today.

We might say that the Sh'ma is at the heart of much of religious faith today, whether we are Jewish or Christian or followers of some other religious tradition. For it calls God's faithful followers to do six things –

first to love God,
then to hold God in one's heart,
then to teach one's children about God,
then to talk about God wherever one goes from dawn until dark,
then to wear God in one's actions, and
finally to post God on the doors of one's home.

That's a pretty all encompassing focus. God is to be the basis for all of life, according to the Jewish prayer of Sh'ma.

In responding to the question from the Pharisees about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus adds to the law about loving God, a second law, which he draws from the Book of Leviticus in the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament to us: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18)

“Each [of these laws] assumes the other, but together they form the basis on which everything else depends. [It has been suggested that] the whole of Scripture may be understood as an exposition of these two commandments. Miss these, says Jesus, and you have missed it all.”^[1]

Something new caught my attention in the reading of our passage from Matthew this week. And I have to say I find myself continually reading passages of Scripture again and again, as if for the first time, even after twenty years in ministry. To me this IS what makes Scripture “the word of God” – its ability to present new insights about God each time I read it. *That* makes Scripture a living testament of God. Especially now, in the midst of the chaos we are experiencing because of the pandemic, and because of the political and societal clashing all around us each day, we need something to ground us, don't you think?

What caught my attention this week was the WAY Jesus answers the Pharisees' question. He doesn't say you MUST love God and your neighbor. He doesn't say you WILL love God and your neighbor. He doesn't say you HAVE

TO love God and your neighbor. He says you SHALL love God and your neighbor. Some of the translations simply say, “Love God,” and “Love neighbor.” The majority of translations say, “You SHALL love...”

Now, Jesus probably meant the words as a commandment – something you WILL DO. But to use the word “shall” implies something different to me. And WHAT it implies makes all the difference in the world.

I can’t speak for any of you, but I know I don’t like to be told what to do. Anyone who knows me at all knows I don’t take orders well! But hearing the word “shall” implies choice to me. What if we thought of Jesus’ words to love God and our neighbor as a matter of choice, not of command?

People, especially Americans, like to have choices. I think that’s what is behind the term “church shopping.” We want to be able to choose which church we might want to attend – based on many things – its location and how close it is to our homes and thereby convenient, or the people who make up the congregation and their level of friendliness, the music and how much it suits our taste, the minister’s sermons and how much they keep our attention, the level of commitment to service to the community the church holds, the quality of the coffee and cookies in the hospitality hour – which I do hope some day we can have again! Based on any or all of these things, and perhaps more, we choose a church to attend.

But lots of people don’t go to church, or synagogue, or temple nowadays. I read a statistic a while back while I was sitting in a doctor’s waiting room that indicated that less than half of all Americans go to church. There was no breakdown to this – so I don’t know whether the statistic took into account all those Americans who might go to a Jewish synagogue or a Muslim mosque or a Buddhist sitting or any other spiritual meeting place. But the statistic did strike me in its emphasis that a lot of people CHOOSE not to go to church. As you know, I certainly made that choice for the first half of my life.

I know this doesn’t necessarily mean a lot of people choose not to believe in or love God or love their neighbor, but it does seem that there’s little respect for God nowadays and a lot of disinterest in following God, rather than human desires and human leaders. And if we keep up with the daily news, there is a fair amount of mistrust and downright stiff-necked hatred towards neighbors in our country right now. Many people are not making what *I* would consider right choices.

But here’s the rub – what if one person’s right choices are another person’s wrong choices? What if one Christian, or group of Christians, believe all people

need to be Christian in order to be saved and to be followers of God, while another Christian, or group of Christians believe there are many ways to receive God's salvation beyond being followers of Jesus as the Christ? What if one Christian is of one political party and another Christian is of another political party and they absolutely do not agree on anything, from religion to political candidates?

There is no final or good answer to this rubbing question – it seems to me that it is somewhat like Jesus' question to the Pharisees when he says to them, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" (Matthew 22:42) And they become confused and speechless.

Some things are beyond reasoning, and since the beginning, we, have had a hard time looking beyond reasoning – our own, or the reasoning of whatever particular philosophy or religious teaching we have assumed. I want to say, "If everyone in the world would just believe as I do, the way I do, we'd all be better off!" But people make choices.... And they are not always the same choices.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37, 39) Shall we? Or shall we pick and choose whom we love, as they suit our preferences?

Here's the questions for the day – What choices are you making about loving God and loving your neighbor? How shall you demonstrate your love for God and your neighbor? What choices are you making about how you will convey that loving to our children? These are NOT easy questions – for they push the faith envelop. They will stretch us, if we are honest with ourselves, and if we let them open us up to our prejudices.

Some years ago I read a story, a true story, of an incident in Billings, Montana. "A five-year-old Jewish boy placed a menorah in his bedroom window. [A menorah is a form of lampstand used in Jewish services of worship. You might compare the menorah's significance to the place we hold for our altar candles.] Later some members of a hate group saw [the menorah in the boy's room] and threw a brick through [his] window almost injuring the boy and his mother. In solidarity with him, members of the Billings Christian community and other religious communities also displayed menorahs – a profound way of showing love for neighbor. The unity of the community diminished hate, fear, and violence."^[2]

Here's another question: If YOU lived in Billings, Montana, would you have been willing to place a menorah in your window to show your solidarity with a Jew

who had been the victim of a hate crime? If there was a Muslim member of our community who was the victim of a hate crime, would you, if you are a woman, be willing to wear a headscarf, in the Islamic tradition for women, to show your solidarity with a woman of the Muslim faith? If a young gay man was thrown off a bridge somewhere in the midcoast of Maine, as happened in Bangor some years ago, would you, as a man, have been willing to write a letter to the editor of the local papers to express your outrage at such an atrocious act of hatred and sign your name?

There are many ways for us to show our love for God and for our neighbor, no matter who that neighbor is. Some of the ways are easy to carry out –

like coming to church, when we can do that safely nowadays, and welcome the stranger amongst us,

like reaching out to those we know who are alone and unable to be with us in person because of the pandemic in our midst right now,

like sending off checks to places we'll never see where people are living in unspeakable conditions and in fear for their lives every day – either from solitary snipers or gangs of terrorists.

Some of the ways to show our love for God and for our neighbor are much more difficult –

like standing in solidarity with someone very different from us,

like refusing to believe that just because someone is of a different race, or religious faith, or economic level, or sexual orientation, or different political party, that they are somehow less precious than we are before God....

We have many choices before us – especially now in the midst of the political and societal battles facing us –

to love or to hate,

to welcome or to shun,

to be open to trying to understand the differences of others or to be closed to anyone the least bit different from us,

to worship together, when we safely can, or sit at home alone and read the paper over coffee.

To love God and neighbor is the question surrounding *all* our choices, especially now, whether we pose that question to ourselves or not. It is the ultimate question. How shall we answer this day?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

**Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome**

Sunday, October 25, 2020

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director

*Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.
And remember to leave Leach Hall promptly after the service
so as to limit our physical time together inside and extend our distance from one
another....*

We SO wish this didn't have to be this way just now.....

Remember to dress warmly for our service in Leach Hall!
We will be keeping some windows and doors open to have air
circulating as much as possible to help keep us all healthy.
Thank you for your consideration of this request....

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude *Alice's choice*

Call to Worship

Repeat after Pastor Susan: O God, as you seek out those who are lost and lonely, find us. As we live in your loving presence, lead us to ultimate joy and freedom. May this good news stir our desire to seek you and your ways this day. Let us worship God.

Opening Hymn to hum "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (two times through)

A Moment of Silence

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Matthew 22:34-46

Gloria Patri No. 338 Red for us to hum..... (follow Alice's lead)

Message "You shall love...." Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

Hymn of Meditation to hum "Fairest Lord Jesus" (two times through)

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer followed by The Lord's Prayer.....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory *Please place your gifts in the offering plate as you leave today....*

Doxology No. 95 Blue for us to hum..... (follow Alice's lead)

Closing Hymn to hum..... "I Love to Tell the Story" (two times through)

Benediction

Postlude *Alice's choice*

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, November 1, 2020

Joshua 3:7-17; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 23:1-12

For All Saints Day: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

"You have never really lived until you have done something for someone who can never repay you." ~ on a road sign

"Today me will live in the moment unless it's unpleasant, in which case me will eat a cookie." ~ Cookie Monster

"Treat a stranger with kindness today. You may be their only hope of having a good day." ~ anonymous

PRAYER LIST

Ed Lee recovering from surgery, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, Pricilla O'Hara on the death of her husband Wally.... ***Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list!***

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Please feel free to contact Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet anytime by phone (207) 322-1948 or by email at freerangepastor@gmail.com or susanstst@aol.com

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^[1]*The Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, revised edition, New York: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 894.

^[2]*In Seasons of the Spirit*, Congregational Life Pentecost 2, p. 92, 2002.