

JUST LENT: Prayer and Love

Matthew 6:5-8 and Matthew 22:34-40

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2017

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Lent is as good a time as any for a “back to the basics” emphasis. What is really important about our Christian faith?

Today’s two scripture readings each focus on one basic element of our faith. You’ve just heard Jesus teaching about prayer, and if you kept reading, you’d read the Lord’s Prayer. If you’re wondering how to pray, I encourage you to say the Lord’s Prayer slowly. Our second reading is also a basic teaching of our faith, a sort of summary of all the teachings. Listen for God’s word.

When the Pharisees heard that he 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?” 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.”

If you had to describe Christian faith with one word, what word would you choose? One word.

Those of you who are well-grounded in Reformed theology might choose GRACE. An excellent choice. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound....” “By grace you have been saved....” (Ephesians 2:10)

Some of you, inspired by Jesus’ initial proclamation and by the prayer we say every time we worship might choose KINGDOM, or REIGN for your one word description of Christian faith. “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done. Another excellent choice.

Some of you, inspired by teachings like what I just read, might choose LOVE. One of the best known verses in the Bible affirms, “For God so loved the

world....” And Jesus makes it clear that love is our primary task. So “Love” is a very good choice, so good that it’s one of the three words on our letterhead, surrounded by LEARNING and LIVING.

Grace, kingdom, and love are all very good one-word descriptions of our faith. I’d like to suggest one more today, one that doesn’t sound very inspired or theological. One word I think is worth considering is RESPONSE.

The various ways that humans respond to God is a central theme in Scripture—and in our life of faith.

In the Garden, in the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve are blessed with life in a beautiful place, and they are given freedom, and told to not do one thing. How would they respond?

In the Exodus narrative, God sets the people free from slavery and oppression, giving them the 10 Commandments to guide their new life. How will the people respond?

Jesus came, proclaiming this Kingdom of God, inviting fishermen and then other people to turn around and follow. He calls them to fish for people, to reorient their priorities. How will these fishermen and other disciples respond?

What about us? How can we respond to God. I suggest we think about PRAYER and LOVE.

The most common understanding of prayer is us asking God for something. “Dear God, please help my friend who has cancer.” “Dear God, we pray for an end to hunger in the world.” “Dear God, bring peace to my family.”

Those are all good prayers, and in ways that I don't understand, I believe that God hears those prayers and that those prayers can make a difference. Like just about anyone else who has prayed, I wish God answered every prayer exactly the way I wanted it to be answered.

But scripture encourages us to pray and scripture records times when God's mind did change because of prayer. Countless people have been renewed and strengthened and maybe even healed because of prayer. So we pray.

I can't say for sure exactly how prayer changes God or changes the circumstances of other people. I wish our prayers were strong enough to change the outcome of the Badger basketball game on Friday.

But I do know that prayer changes me. When I pray for other people, at the very least that prayer changes me and makes me more compassionate, more patient, more loving.

This is why on a regular basis at Session meetings, Deacon meetings, and staff meetings, we make good use of the prayer list, simply reading off the names.

In order for my prayer to make me more loving, I have to be connected to God, to be plugged into God, to be learning about who God is. Richard Foster says it well in the quote in your bulletin.

One of the most critical aspects of learning to pray for others is to get in contact with God so that his life and power can flow through us into others.
--Richard Foster, in *Celebration of Discipline*

In *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Marjorie Thompson also argues that prayer begins with listening. She notes that this is true developmentally: babies learn to listen before they learn to speak. So we are

called to listen for God—in Scripture, in nature, in worship, in our relationships, and in the events of the world around us.

God is calling us, God is loving us. Our response begins with prayerfully listening and loving.

Today in worship, we welcome new members and we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, and in both cases we ask people questions, and a response is necessary. For those of you who've been around the church, those questions are pretty familiar, and sometimes familiarity breeds disinterest and lack of engagement. But those questions and the responses are important, and I'm hearing these questions in a new way, in light of our Lenten emphasis on fast-pray-act.

This first question, about turning away from sin and evil, reminds me of the call to FAST. Are you trying to get rid of the junk in your life? The wasted time and money, the bitterness and hopelessness, the selfishness and foolishness?

JUST LENT
fast...pray...act

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

I do.

JUST LENT
fast...pray...act

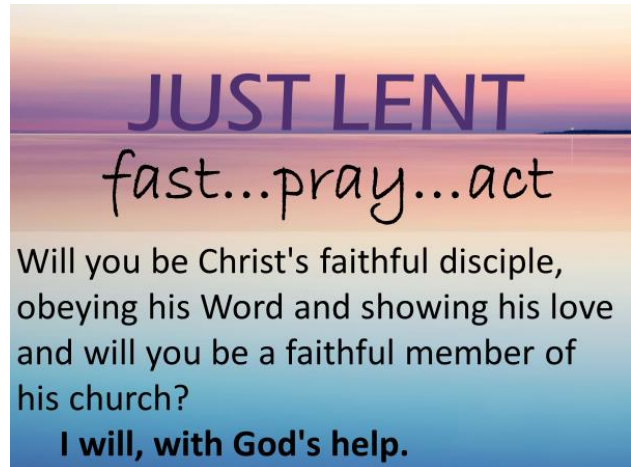
Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

I do.

The second question about Jesus as our Lord and Savior reminds me of the call to PRAYER. Are you going to put God and God's will first? Are you really going to listen for God to speak to you? Is your life

going to be rooted and grounded in God? Are you going to seek first God's kingdom?

The third question reminds me of the call to ACT. What are you going to do with the opportunities of today? How are you, as a beloved child of God, going to make a difference in a world with too many hungry people, and too much warfare, and racism, and greed, and loneliness and despair? How are you going to take that love that God has for you and make it real? How are you going to love your neighbor?



It's hard to fully grasp Christian faith in just one word. But there is something fairly simple at the core of Christian faith: God loves each of us and as we prayerfully listen for that good news, we find ways to love each other.

Let us pray

Thank you for your love O God. Help us to really learn about your love, so that we can really live your love.