

Remembering Our Purpose: Loving God

Mark 12:28-34; Romans 12:1-2

Adapted from "Finding our Purpose: Loving God" (delivered at BPC 10/27/2013)

World War II veteran John Blanchard stood up from the bench, straightened his Army uniform, and studied the crowd of people making their way through Grand Central Station. He was looking for the girl whose heart he knew, but whose face he didn't, the girl with the rose.

His interest in her had begun 13 months before in a Florida library. Taking a book off the shelf he found himself intrigued, not with the words of the book, but with the notes penciled in the margin. The soft handwriting reflected a thoughtful soul and insightful mind. In the front of the book, he discovered the previous owner's name, **Miss Hollis Maynell**. With time and effort he located her address. She now lived in New York City. He wrote her a letter introducing himself and inviting her to correspond. The next day he was shipped overseas for service in the war.

During his tour of duty the two grew to know each other through the mail. A romance was budding. Blanchard requested a photograph, but she refused. She felt that if he really cared, it wouldn't matter what she looked like. When the day finally came for him to return from Europe, they scheduled their first meeting for 7:00 pm at the Grand Central Station in New York. "You'll recognize me," she wrote, "**by the red rose I'll be wearing on my lapel.**"

So at seven he was in the station looking for a girl whose heart he loved, but whose face he'd never seen. I'll let John Blanchard tell you what happened:

"A young woman was coming toward me, her figure long and slim. Her blond hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears; her eyes were blue as flowers. Her lips and chin had a gentle firmness, and in her pale green suit she was like springtime come alive. I started toward her, entirely forgetting to notice that she was not wearing a rose. As I moved, a small, provocative smile curved her lips. "**Goin' my way, soldier?**" she said while moving her hips. Almost uncontrollably I made one step closer to her, and then I saw Miss Hollis Maynell.

She was standing almost directly behind this sensual lady. A woman well past 40, she had graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was rather plump, her thick-ankled feet thrust into low-heeled shoes. The girl in the green suit was walking quickly away. I felt as though I was split in two, so keen was my desire to follow her, and yet so deep was my longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned me and held me up during the war. And there she stood. Her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible, her gray eyes had a warm and kindly twinkle.

I did not hesitate. My fingers gripped the small leather copy of the book that was to identify me to her. This would not be passionate love, but it would be something precious, something perhaps even better than love, a friendship for which I had been and must ever be grateful. I squared my shoulders and saluted and held out the book to the woman, even though while I spoke I felt

choked by my disappointment. "I'm Lieutenant John Blanchard, and you must be Miss Maynell. I am so glad you could meet me. May I take you to dinner?"

The woman's face broadened into a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is about, son," she answered, "*but that young lady in the green suit who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should tell you that she is waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street.*"

French novelist Arsene Houssaye wrote, "*Tell me whom you love and I will tell you who you are.*"

Tell me whom you love and I will tell you who you are.

Who or what do you truly, deeply love?

Not what do you do, but what do you love to do?
Who do you love to be with, with your whole being?

Jesus said, "***Love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind.***"

Like the soldier, John Blanchard, "*the biggest test we will ever face is loving a God whose letters we have read, whose heart we have come to know, but whose face we have never seen.*" (quote from: evangelist Victor Knowles)

Last Sunday, we returned for a few weeks to reflect on our Church's Purpose Statement, with the intention of burying its guidance deep in our hearts and daily lives.

We began with the opening phrase: ***Bedford Presbyterian Church is a Biblically Guided Christian Community.*** Rather than being an exclusionary statement, this is meant to express that we take seriously the teachings of the Bible; for how can you be a follower of Jesus—a Christian—if you are unwilling to learn from him and to change to become more like him...as he is presented to us in our Bibles. So, we had better be welcoming of "*whosoever*" wants to be a part of our community of believers. As sinners saved by grace, we are all welcome to come into God's family, and all expected to change, to grow up and begin to live with the "mind of Christ." (Philippians 2).

But how can we begin to think like Christ? Jesus himself answers that question by reminding us of the **Great Commandment**; which makes up both the second and third parts of our Purpose Statement

Bedford Presbyterian Church is a Biblically Guided Christian Community, loving God and loving others.

You can find the "Great Commandment," as explained by Jesus, in three different places in your Bible. Both Matthew's and Mark's Gospel accounts record a time when Jesus replied to a specific question that had been put to him (Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 10:25-28). Then the third time, Jesus is the one doing the questioning of a Jewish lawyer on the same topic and upon receiving the same answer, he then challenges that lawyer on his declared love for "neighbors" by telling the story of the "Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-28). We'll look closer into that portion of the Great Commandment next week, but for now let's stick with "loving God" as it is presented in Mark's version.

It is the last week of Jesus' life. He has returned to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast and the Jewish authorities, desperate to eliminate him, are now following Jesus through the streets challenging him at every turn; seeking to entrap him into saying something for which they can arrest him.

First the Pharisees ask him a tax question hoping to get Jesus into trouble with the Roman authorities: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* But they are dismissed with a brilliant rebuttal: *give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.* So next, the Sadducees attempt to make him look foolish with a theological question about marriage in heaven for a woman married seven times on earth. Jesus silences them by replying that marriage in Heaven is not the same as that on Earth, but he also loudly wonders why they are asking such a silly question since they don't even believe in life-after-death; and then concludes that they know nothing of either the scriptures or the power of God.

After this, one Pharisee upon hearing Jesus giving wise responses to these dishonest challenges, decides to ask a question worth answering. So he asks Jesus to **summarize all of God's Ten Commandments and the 600+ Hebrew laws expanding upon those commandments into a single maxim by which to live.** Now, while this also sounds like another impossibility, it was actually quite a popular question that many people of that day were trying to answer. So, in essence he was asking Jesus to give his personal Purpose Statement for life.

Jesus replied by combining Moses' summary of the Ten Commandments: ***You shall love the Lord your God***

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, [and then he adds] ***and with all your strength,*** with a another command found in the book of Leviticus: ***and you shall love your neighbor as yourself*** (Deuteronomy 6:4 & Leviticus 19:18).

In Matthew's version of this event, Jesus then declared that every one of God's laws and everything that he personally taught was just an expansion upon these two themes. In Mark's version, this asking Pharisee joyously agrees with Jesus that "loving God and loving neighbor" was far more important than all the rest of Jewish ritual combined.

So we, who would be followers of Jesus, need to be committed to loving God and loving each other with every ounce of our being: heart, mind, soul, and strength. Everything else, according to Jesus, hinges on this.

But what is real love?

There is a tremendous amount of confusion in our world today about what love is. We use the word so casually, so carelessly. How many times have men and women told each other "*I love you,*" when in truth they only wanted into bed for the night, or were after the other's check book.

So many things parade around as "love" in our society that we have lost touch with what love really is. Think about the TV shows that have used the word "love" or the idea of love to attract an audience: "How I met your Mother", "Modern Family", "Scandal", "The Bachelor", or "Bachelorette". How often do viewers see real, selfless,

sacrificial, committed, long-term love on these shows? I remember that some time back, one network advertised their daytime soap operas as "**Love in the Afternoon**," but I suspect what they really broadcast was "lust in the afternoon," or "lying, cheating, and fooling around in the afternoon." Rarely have we seen real love depicted on TV or in the movies.

But for you and me—for Christians—it is vitally important for us to know what real love is. According to Jesus, the two most important duties of our Christian life both concern showing real love.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

First, notice that the real love Jesus would have us show God encompasses **ALL** of who we are: Jesus started with our emotions (heart), then with our convictions (soul), then with all our thinking (mind), and then he added with all our efforts (strength).

Because love in its truest sense demands all of our being; it demands abandonment of self on behalf of the other. And true love demands every part of our life and—as Jesus proved—if needed: our death. Perhaps the best image of such love to come out of the movies would be the Princess Bride. When young Wesley because of his love for childhood sweetheart Buttercup, was tortured by the evil prince Humperdink, until he was "mostly dead"; his friends rescue bring him and bring him Miracle Max for a cure. Max first pumps enough air into Wesley to

ask "*what is worth living for?*" And when he pushes the air out, the answer comes back: "true love".

True love is a good answer. True love is worth both living and dying for, and just as Wesley showed us, true love is not so much a feeling or an emotion as it is a decision to give oneself to another. Wesley had pledged his love to Buttercup, and even though she had now, apparently, left him, he would not leave her.

We don't fall into love. Those emotions you feel at first sight are not love, they are something else (either that or last night's pizza). True love is something we choose to offer or we choose not to offer. It must grow out of our whole being.

That is why we are called to love God so completely, because God loved us so completely that he gave Himself in exchange for our life. And our only **reasonable response** would be to return His love. Believe it or not, **the Bible has a word for such personally convicted, all committed love of God on our part...it's called "WORSHIP"**.

Have you ever thought about what the word "worship" actually means? At its root level it means "having worth," being worthy of and being given our honor and our love.

Today's second scripture lesson in Romans declares that in view of what God gave to prove his love for us, our **reasonable response**—what we should decide to do—is return His Love by giving our lives back to him as an act of **worship**—heart, mind, soul, and strength (Romans 12:1-2).

Realize that God loved us first with a far greater love than any amount we can return to Him. Our Bible is filled with declarations and demonstrations of God's love:

- Jeremiah 31:3 declares that God has loved us with an everlasting love.
- The Psalmist praises God for knowing us, naming us, and numbering our days while we were yet in our mother's womb (Psalm 139:13-16).
- Paul says that God proved His love to us, while we were yet enemies, by Christ dying for us (Romans 5:8-10)

So, as our Bible teaches, if Christ died so that we might live, then the life we thereafter live should be dedicated to living for Him: with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (II Corinthians 5:15).

With all our Heart, because God wants us to be as head over heels for Him as he is for us. Nothing hurts more than unreturned love.

Sandra Palmer Carr tells of the time she was rocking her younger son, Boyd, who was then four years old. They were in a high-backed rocking chair, and Boyd was looking up at his mom as they rocked.

Suddenly, he lifted his little head, stared straight at his mother, and became very still. Then he cupped her face in his little hands and said almost in a whisper, "*Mommy, I'm in your eyes.*" He had seen his own reflection in his mother's eyes, and it was a startling discovery. Sandra stopped rocking and held Boyd in that same position for several long moments, then said quietly, "*And I am in*

your eyes too!" Then he leaned his head against her contentedly and she resumed rocking.

Occasionally, in the days that followed, Boyd would check to see if his discovery was still true. "*Am I still in your eyes, Mommy?*" Sandra thought about the love of God for her and said, "*In life's uncertain moments, it is comforting to know I am still in my heavenly Father's eyes.*" ("The Upper Room")

Loving God and others means that we have them in our eyes. Our attention is focused on them in a caring way. In his first letter, John wrote, "*We love because God first loved us.*" In other words the only reason we even know about love is because God taught us how to love. Maybe we could say, "Because God first had us in His eyes, we should now always have Him in ours.

Real love begins as an attitude of the heart. God wants us to be as emotionally involved with Him as He is with us. But, loving God also involves our soul.

Our "soul" refers to our will power. In our soul is where we make commitments. If you truly love someone, if you are head over heels in love with them, then you will act on that love. **For God so loved: He gave. What are we willing to give in response to our love for God?** Paul says that our entire lives should now be lived as an act of worship; this is a reasonable response on our part.

So God wants us to be truly in love with Him, emotionally committed and willing to act on that

love. But God also wants into our heads. He wants our minds to be involved.

To love God "with your mind" is to become a student of God, a student who really takes an interest in God, one who wants to know more about God. And when heart and soul are added we pursue our learning with passion, with all our being. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians (3:10-15), ***I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings....Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.***

- Remember those dating days when all you wanted to do is learn everything about your true love?
- Should not lovers get preoccupied with their beloved?
- Shouldn't we be passionate with learning as much as possible about God? We should be just as passionate as our young soldier was to learn everything about this woman whom he had met only through letters?

Love of God is not just simple knowledge of God. Many people have some knowledge of God and his Word, but it does not lead to love. Sometimes it leads to pride, arrogance, or selfishness. **But true love will involve every part of our being heart, soul, and mind; and everything else we've got; which is why Jesus also added "our strength." God is deep. To truly love God will take all you can give and plenty of your time.**

Question: Why should we love God this way?

Answer: Because this is how He has always loved us.

Now the question becomes, how do you say thank you for such love?

How much of you are you willing to give back in response to God's love?

Let's think about the custom of tipping that waitress/waiter, who is dependent on our generosity for their livelihood. Did they give you minimal, or superior service? In response will you give them nothing extra, or 10%, or 20%, or do you give them everything?

This last April, 18-year-old Alesha Palmer was working at Vetoni's Italian Restaurant in Gun Barrel City, Texas, when she mentioned her upcoming college plans to a couple seated at one of her tables. She didn't know that she was being overheard by another customer sitting at her next table. When he got up to pay his bill he left her a \$1,000 tip on a \$9.69 tab.

And if you think that was overly generous of a patron who just wanted to shower some love on the waitress who had served him, realize that God did even more than that out of His all consuming love for you...before you ever did anything to deserve such love.

That's why Jesus said that the greatest way we can live for God is to return His love with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; which the Apostle Paul would later

declare as our reasonable response, and that is **true worship**.

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What is the purpose of any church?

What should we as members of Bedford Presbyterian be committed to?

Rick Warren said, *A great commitment to the Great Commandment will grow a great church.* And the Great Commandment teaches that we should love God and our neighbor with all our being: heart, soul, mind, and effort.

- Such love is a not passing fancy but a conscience long-term decision on our part,
- such love will always lead us to definite actions.
- Such love is worth giving our whole life too – and if needed even our death.

This is what Jesus thought. This is how Jesus lived his life. Which is why we took his recommendation in making the Great Commandment a part of our own purpose statement. Will you do the same?

Bedford Presbyterian is a Biblically Guided Christian Community Loving God, Loving Others, serving the World, as growing Disciples. *And we would love to have you as part of this family.*