

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
October 25, 2020 21st Sunday after Pentecost

207 South Brodie St. Thunder Bay
<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

Words of Welcome

I have heard criticisms of the Christian faith around why would God demand love and praise. I think that is unfair. God created us out of overflowing love between the Father, Son, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. God desires our love but does not demand it. We are free to choose who and what we love. Today we look at some ways love for God may be manifest in our lives.

Call to Worship

The Lord our God has been our dwelling place in all generations.
From everlasting to everlasting God is God, and so we come to worship.

O God, satisfy us every morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Let us tell of God's glorious power and praise God's holy name.
We offer God the work of our hands and praise from the depths of our hearts.
Let us worship God together.

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Music can open us up to the movement of the Spirit, both our own and God's.

Hymn

For the Fruit of All Creation

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1. For the fruits of all creation, thanks be to God;
for the gifts to every nation, thanks be to God;
for the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
silent growth while we are sleeping,
future needs in earth's safe keeping, thanks be to God.
2. In the just reward of labour, God's will is done;
in the help we give our neighbor, God's will is done;
in our worldwide task of caring
for the hungry and despairing,
in the harvests we are sharing, God's will is done.
3. For the harvests of the Spirit, thanks be to God
for the good we all inherit, thanks be to God;
for the wonders that astound us,
for the truths that still confound us,
most of all, that love has found us, thanks be to God.

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Opening Prayer

God, gracious and loving, holy and eternal,
Your love is steadfast, your presence ever near,
yet you come to us in surprising ways and unexpected places.
Your love is older than time and as fresh as the morning dew.
Your patience is unending, your faithfulness to us unmatched.
Your name has come to us through the centuries,
yet you can always do a new thing to draw us back to you.

Lord God, send us your Holy Spirit as we listen to the scriptures this day.
Open our ears to hear your Word speaking in these words.
Open our hearts to receive your Word and respond in love and service.

God, Creator, Christ and Spirit,
we offer you our prayers and praise this day
In humble expectation,
hoping you will surprise us here and refresh our readiness to serve you.

God, gracious and merciful, holy and healing,
You know our hearts, the times we have truly loved one another
and those times when we merely tolerated each other.
You know our minds, the times we have truly focused on you
and the times when we pursued our own purposes.
You know our stories, the times we have followed you faithfully
and the times we went our own way.

Forgive our wavering discipleship and half-hearted service,
and renew our commitment to live lives marked by your grace. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

Friends in Christ, we are forgiven people,
set free from our past failures to make a fresh start this day and every day.
The Holy Spirit empowers us to love God and to love others.
Thanks be to God for such everlasting mercy and grace!

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The scripture reading is set in the day after Jesus had entered Jerusalem and the crowds had welcomed him with palm branches. He has been teaching the people in the temple, all the while being questioned by the temple authorities of elders, scribes Sadducees, and Pharisees, each with their own agenda. Hear now words of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew.

Scripture Reading Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet”’?

⁴⁵If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Reflection Love the Lord your God

It has already been a day of testing. First one group, then another, now another, all of them with authority in the Temple, asking Jesus what they believe are tough questions. He is being questioned about his authority to teach as he does, he is questioned about whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he has had a question about the resurrection of people from a group that doesn't even believe in resurrection from the dead, and now he is being tested on whether or not he has an understanding of which commandment in the law is the greatest.

This last question was not so tough. Every pious Jew had been, since infancy, exposed to and then taught the Shema, words from Deuteronomy 6:5 which say, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Actually, Jesus' answer may have caught their attention because he changed up one word. The Shema says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might. Jesus had answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*.” (Matt 22:37) Just one little word different. Both may be important, but I think it interesting that Jesus said with all your mind instead of might. As was said, it certainly would have caught the attention of all who were listening.

Now, one may think that to love God with all you mind takes doing it with all your might, but was it meant that way? I have posted at my desk, so that I see it every time I look up, the verse from Proverbs 3:5-6 that says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.” It is a reminder to me that what I think about affect the outcome of everything I do. When I remember to lean on God, and not on my own understanding, my heart, and body follow. There is a reason I have it posted, as it often takes me multiple reminders a day to remember to put God first so that all other things - decisions, actions, words - will follow as best as possible.

It seems such a simple answer to the question of which commandment in the law is the greatest... “You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” How hard can that be? Turns out it is likely one of the most difficult things one can aspire to. Part of the reason the Shema was said daily, why I have a reminder posted, is that it is so easy to forget that which can actually change the way we live. When one loves God with all their heart, soul, and mind, you are giving your whole self to God and since we like to have control over our own lives, even if that is not how life really plays out, to actually give our whole selves to God is a really difficult ask.

God gave us minds so that we could think for ourselves, solve problems, make decisions, question thing we learn, know, and experience. How then can we just turn around and give it all that power back to God? Well, the thing is that we are not asked to give up our inquiring, problem solving, decision making minds. We are asked to use our minds, but to acknowledge at the same time that God is present, available and desires to help us make the best decisions possible, and love God, others, and ourselves in the most purposeful and beautiful ways.

These words remind us that God comes first, before your partner, your children, your friends, your church and community, God comes first. When God is first in our lives...when we give ourselves body, mind, and spirit, to God...then everything we say, hear, and see, every decision and action that we take, the lens through which we see ourselves, our neighbours, and the world, is through our understanding of God.

This is also why it is important to understand that God, first and foremost, is a God of love. Yes, there is judgement, accountability, even discipline, but that is all experienced through God who loved us so much that he sent his son Jesus Christ to experience life with us, to then bring hope, forgiveness, and abundant life. If you do not know God as love then please hear me now, God loves you, God loves those we think are unlovable, God is love.

It is why the second commandment follows from the first, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matt 22:39) The underlying assumption here is that because you know

God's love for you, and thus the fact that you are loved and lovable, you can love others as you love yourself. Please think about what that means in a time when Twitter feeds, Facebook statuses, and Instagram, along with newsfeeds are filled with opinions and misinformation. A time when political leaders, police forces, health care, #black lives matter, the #me too movement, homophobia, Covid, climate change, poverty free living, and refugees, are topics of debate in both the private and public spheres of our lives.

When given the opportunity, how do you speak into these conversations? Is it in a way that loves your neighbor and loves God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind? If you want to understand what it means to love more fully, read the words of scripture, particularly the words of Jesus, paying attention not only to the words, but to his actions. Pay attention to the fact that Jesus spent more time with those who had little - little money, power, or authority - than with those who had much. Pay attention to the fact that Jesus healed those who were hurting, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

He fed the hungry, healed the broken, and taught about God's love and forgiveness. He cried over death and even over the city of Jerusalem, knowing that they could not see how far removed they were from the will of God for them. He said in Matthew 25, "Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matt 25:34-36)

Pay attention to how you think, what you say, and what you do for through your thoughts, words, and actions, you and others will know if you love God and love neighbour. Do not think that because you cannot do it perfectly that it is not worth doing. We are made in the image of God, but we are not God, which is why we live imperfectly. Still, we can strive and become more and more able to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind, and love our neighbour as ourselves.

To remember these words, to act upon them daily, is life giving and life changing, for you and for those whose lives you impact because of the lens through which you view the world, the way you experience the world. May God bless your thinking and your living as you become more and more a person who loves God, the other, and yourself. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Faithful God and Holy Friend,

We do not have enough words to thank you for all you have given us and the love you share with us in Christ Jesus.

In the silence of this time, help us review the week just past, remembering the ways we encountered you—in the beauty of creation, the support of friends, the wisdom of books, the joy of music, the energy of exercise, through study and prayer.

God of comfort and challenge,
we are grateful for your presence in these uncertain times at home, at work and at school. We give you thanks for your attention to the small details and the large responsibilities we face.

Be with us as the months of pandemic continue. Give us patience to keep each other safe and make us attentive to the needs of those around us.

In silence we name before you those finding these days especially difficult.

God of persistence and inspiration,
we remember before you the many who struggle to recognize your presence or fail to hear your voice amid all the competing voices in our world.

We pray for those feeling depressed or anxious, those facing grief and loneliness, and those who are worried about their health or their security.

Do not forget these people even if they forget you.

Comfort them and fill them with peace.

God of justice and leadership,

We pray for our country and all other nations facing immense challenges with COVID-19. Guide decision makers and keep the hearts of those with resources open to those who do not have enough.

We pray for places where justice is lacking, where violence threatens, or leaders are untrustworthy. Strengthen voices of wisdom and acts of courageous compassion to tend the needs of people most at risk.

God of grace and guidance,

You call us to be your hands and feet, your voice and comfort in the world, following the example of Jesus. Equip us to respond to the needs around us in his name and make us bold to get started right here and right now.

For we dare to pray the words Jesus taught us;

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

God is both faithful and generous, embracing each generation of people. God blesses our gifts and makes them fruitful beyond our imagining in the work of your kingdom.

If you would like to make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information.

In song we recall and bring close the greatest and first commandment, remember that it is not complete without love for others and ourselves. Hear and remember the hymn *Love the Lord your God*.

Hymn

Love the Lord your God

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Love the Lord your God,
with all your heart.
Love the Lord your God
with all your soul.
Love the Lord your God
with all your mind,
Love the Lord your God
with all that you are.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart" Tune: © 1991
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Benediction

And now go forth,
to love God with all your heart, your mind, your soul:
with passion, with prayer, with intelligence;
to love your neighbor:
with forgiveness, with service, with love;
and to love yourself:
with hope, with joy, with peace.

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