

*One of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together. Knowing that he had answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the greatest of all?” Jesus answered, “The greatest is, ‘Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one: 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.’ This is the first commandment. The second is like this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe said to him, “Truly, teacher, you have said well that he is one, and there is none other but he, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from God’s Kingdom.”*

If you go into the hospital as a trauma, what is the VERY first thing they do? [Check to see if you are breathing and your heart is beating.] If that isn't happening, then someone will start CPR while the team tries to get your heart started and oxygen circulating through your body. They may give your heart a shock or medicine and they may put a tube down your throat so a machine can breath for you. Why is that? Why do they start there? [Because the rest of your body, especially your brain, can't go very long without oxygen before the cells start to die.]

Once they either make sure those are working—or once they get them working—then they can begin to work through other injuries.

Can you guess where they start? [They start at your head.] Once you are getting oxygenated, they check you out “heat to toe.” At least generally speaking.

One more question. Why do they start at the head? [Because the brain controls the rest of the body and they need to be sure that the take care of any problems there first—before they check out your hands and feet and toes and fingers and such.]

When someone is really injured, they may even stabilize broken arms or legs and set them later. Those are important injuries and important parts of your body, but not the most important—especially in the moment.

As I look around this church and look at all of you, I see so much that you do and so much that you take care of. I was up here yesterday and George was working away on the computers. From the sign to the buildings to the music to the teaching to the plans for the future—there is so much done to make the worship and the church special today but also next year and the year after and years and years after that.

Thank you for what you do. It is important. I know you sacrifice in many ways to keep this church together and running smoothly (or mostly smoothly anyway).

Now I hope that you are clear. Your work is appreciated more than you know and I know the church is aware that we can never repay those who serve.

As we move into the future, there ARE some very specific things that will be required for us to thrive—even to survive as we try to be God's church in this place.

If we were a spiritual trauma team, we would do like a physical trauma team and start with the most important—and as they do, we would go head to toe.

The head—the most important thing—is love.

Not that the rest doesn't matter. It does. A broken finger or toe is painful and can gum up the works for the rest of the body, can't it?

Changing the light bulbs when they go out is important. Making the copier copy is important. Doing the newsletter is important.

But to paraphrase Paul, “If I sweep the parking lot and if I preach and if I teach and if I cook and if I play the music and if I do every job in the church, without love I'm nothing more than a grating noise and that's it.”

Our passage for the day is about relationship.

Again.

Why is that? Why is there so much in the Bible about relationship? Why is that more important than actions?

I don't know but I'll guess that it has to do with Jesus said about sin coming from the heart—that murder comes from hate and sexual sin comes from lust.

Love and right relationship is the basis for actions that are pure and right.

The passage for today talks about relationship to God and relationship to neighbors—of course if you factor in the parable of good Samaritan, we must admit that EVERYONE is our neighbor.

Friend. Brother. Sister. Parents. Neighbor. Coworker. Foreigner. Enemy.

You know I knew relationships were important, but it was when I became an intern at a hospital that I really noticed that people in crisis talk about and think about and worry about relationships most of all.

Patients worried about their relationships to their families. Sometimes they worried about their relationship to self—how they had or had not honored the life God gave them and the talents they had been given. Families worried about relationships to the patient. Really sick patients sometimes worried over their relationship to God and people they may have hurt or mistreated.

Others celebrated their relationships to each other and to God—even when they were dying and the families sometimes celebrated even after the patient died—telling stories and laughing (and crying but celebrating still.)

There are three types of relationships that are important—the most important things. The head in our head-to-toe evaluation.

1. Relationship to God. As Christians, we can put that relationship at the top—just like it is in our passage for the day. “Love God with all your being...”

God is the creator and sustainer of all that is. He created humankind to have a direct and real relationship with him. In some sense, if you look at Adam and Eve's relationship to God, God was seeking to have human beings relate to him as loving friends. He had that direct and real relationship to them in the garden. Once that relationship was broken, God sought to redeem creation.

Ultimately, the job of redemption was placed directly on the Son. Jesus' work is a pathway to a permanent and real relationship to the Father. We can find that relationship by saying “yes” to the one who is seeking each of us and seeking to perfect us—again through relationship to Jesus the Christ.

Notice that I didn't say anything about “getting religion.” As many of you have already noticed, I love great worship. Good singing. Good preaching. Time for prayer. Orderly and helpful. This is well and good and very important. Still, it is relationship I am talking about, not religious activity. If you will remember, there were times when God sent prophets to his people – condemning them – when they were conducting worship regularly and seemingly properly. And I am sure most of you are aware that the ones with whom Jesus fought the most and the ones for whom he had the harshest words of condemnation were the Scribes and Pharisees – arguably the most religious people of his day. He called them blind guides. He called them whitewashed tombs. He called them dirty cups – polished clean on the outside but full of mold and mildew on the inside.

Come to the Father through the Son and then let your worship, your religious activity flow from that relationship.

Serve in this church and in this community for the sake of God and in his service. How do we know when we are doing the work of God and doing our religion for the right reasons? Attitude. WHY are we doing what we do? Why are we doing this work and why are we serving these people?

*Philippians 2:3-11 3 Doing nothing through rivalry or through conceit, but in humility, each counting others better than himself; 4 each of you not just looking to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others. 5 Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, existing in the form of God, didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross. 9 Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name; 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

(2) Self – how do we honor our relationship to self? This will be short. We honor ourselves when we are about who God created us to be. Plain and simple. We take our illnesses seriously and we go to the doctor. We eat as well and as healthy as possible. We take time off – Sabbath time – for the sake of our bodies and for our minds. We learn to say no when we need to. We listen to ourselves and go as slowly as we need to.

We need to understand the talents and gifts that God gave each of us – to take the time to grow them and to feed them. Using them for service to others and service to God, but also – and maybe more important sometimes – for our own edification and our own personal growth. Learn and do and grow for the joy which comes from doing something well and doing what you are talented to do The Bible is full of heroes – large and small – who simply developed and used who they were, for self, for God, and for others. Who comes to mind? Solomon? David – shepherd and rock-slinger. Rock STAR. He didn't know what was going to happen--what he was preparing for as he thumped stumps and rocks with his slingshot. He was just growing talents that God gave him. Even Rahab, the harlot or innkeeper (or both) used the fact that her business was built on a city wall to help God's people.

(3) Others – well, the first thing is to remember that Jesus commanded us to love those around us as we love ourselves. Taking care of their needs when possible. Caring for them spiritually and physically. Caring what happens to them. Expenditure time and money and effort on them, as the good Samaritan did on the injured man. We are to love those around us – in this community and in this world seeking to put feet on our love. In this they will see God's love.

Then, we are to love one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Why is that? Many reasons – but here are some important ones. First, it is in that love that we can grow. We can be accountable in love. We can be held up in love. We can be strengthened by our relationships with those like us–those with the same goals and ideals. Also, Jesus said that it is by our love for one another that the world will believe that we are his – and that we are doing his work. When a church is fighting and arguing and holding grudges – the whole community knows it. Do you know how much positive influence we can be? None! Only negative. We can build buildings and parking lots and we can do dramas and musicals and we can have any ministry you can name, but we will not reach those around us if we aren't right with each other.

I have some other news on this front – if we are not in right relationship with each other, we are not in right relationship with God. Period. If that is the case, God does not even want us to pretend that it is. This is why Jesus suggested that if we are headed for worship and remember that we have something amiss with one of our brothers (or sisters) that we should leave our sacrifice (our worship) on the steps of the temple – in danger of being destroyed or stolen – and go and make that right first.

We might relate the church's situation – the worldwide church – to a patient who has been carried to the emergency room. Our very survival – and the eternal lives of those around us – may depend on what happens in the emergency room. I love the things this church is doing here. Still, I encourage you not to get busy and forget the basics. We need oxygen and we need our head to be working—in this case, love is the head. Think “head to toe.” We should never neglect our relationships with God, with self, and others, for it is those things that we will grow as humans, grow as a church, and grow in our knowledge and understanding of God.