

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
November 12, 2006

Mark 12:28-34

Love Doctrine

When people call the church office to inquire about St. John, the question is often asked, “what’s the doctrine of your church?” Doctrine is about policy and principles. People want to know what we believe. Can I take communion at your church even if I was baptized in another church? If I was baptized in another church do I have to be baptized here, as well? What are the requirements at your church, Pastor?

Jesus is asked this question in the lesson for today. What commandment is the first of all? What is the requirement we must follow? The writer of Mark begins with these words from Jesus, “Hear, O 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.” Then Jesus gives the second commandment as well, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The next time someone calls and asks about our doctrine, I’m going to tell them our doctrine is love. Love God, love neighbor as yourself. Now wait a minute, Pastor—you’re making it too easy. Just love God and your neighbor as yourself. Why anybody can be a member if that’s all that is required!

I don’t know about you, but I’ve had some neighbors that were pretty difficult to love. And if neighbors are also the strangers we meet along the way, how tough is it to love someone you don’t even know. Actually, following this commandment is more difficult than saying that I believe in some religious doctrine, like the Triune God. I could say I don’t understand the Triune God, but how can I claim to be ignorant about love. Fulfilling the command to love is the difficult part.

Where do we begin on the “how to” of following Jesus on this? We begin with love of God. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. Loving God is an all-body experience. All that we are, as biological, spiritual and intellectual beings, is included in the call to love God. Not one part of who we are is excluded in this formula for loving God.

Is loving God difficult? It seems the more difficult part is to believe that God loves us. In the book “If Grace is True,” Philip Gulley and James Mulholland give this definition of grace: “Grace is God’s unfailing commitment to love.” We sing about “Amazing Grace” and find it hard to believe grace is true. We’ve made too many mistakes, we keep going back over the same ground time and again, we just

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don't get it right. Maybe what we don't get is that God loves us, unconditionally, and will keep on loving us no matter what. God's love for us is irrefutable, undeniable and absolute.

Singer, songwriter, Sara Groves, penned these words:

*Love wash over a multitude of things, Love wash over a multitude of things,
Love wash over a multitude of things, Make us whole.
There is a love that never fails, There is a healing that always prevails,
There is a hope that whispers a vow
A promise to wait while we're working it out,
So come with your love and wash over us.*

Love is the unexplainable mystery that brings two people back together after one has been unfaithful. Love is the deep commitment that keeps someone believing in the person whose track record says they will fail again. Love is the compassion that keeps us at the bedside of one who is dying to say, "You will not be alone as you make your way back to God." Love is the courage that stands with those whom the world condemns for the ways in which they express their love.

Love God, love us, and love our neighbor. How can we love our neighbor who sees God differently from us? How can we love our neighbor who looks different from us? How can we love our neighbor whose words make us cringe or make us angry? How can we love our neighbor who has no love for anyone else?

A doctrine of love, a theology of love is grounded in the realization that God loves everyone else as much as God loves us. We are all created in the image of this God. We are all precious in God's sight. We are all children of God. This, more than any other idea, changes how we perceive others. It requires us to call every man and every woman by the names that make murder nearly impossible—brother and sister. What we call one another matters. If we call others unsaved, wicked, sinners, pagans or heathens, we no longer recognize them as children of God. This demonizing of humanity has been part of every genocide, massacre, war or oppression. When we call others...our neighbors, brothers, sisters or friends...we begin to recognize them as kindred souls, as part of us.

Here is one more thought for us to ponder as to what it means to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Our world has conditioned us to an assumption—an assumption that there isn't enough to go around, that the resources of life are scarce...the scarcity assumption. Major institutions are rooted in this assumption

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of scarcity. If they can convince us that whatever resource that they alone control is in scarce supply, then they hold the power.

This scarcity assumption has permeated our religious life as well. It makes us think that God's love is limited and that unless we follow the right doctrine and the right belief with the right understanding of God's rules, we will fall short of God's love and we will be doomed to a place of torment known as hell. It is the belief that God's love is limited to only one expression of faith and that all others will be cast into hell. It is, in my opinion, a mistaken belief that God would send us to hell for overestimating God's love.

God's love is limitless. God's love is deeper than the deepest ocean, higher than the tallest mountain, reaches farther than the farthest galaxy. And nothing, my dear friends, can separate us from the love God...nothing. That is a promise of scripture. That's why our doctrine is simply love. Say it with me—Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

Now go out and live in that love.