

John 21:15-17

“Focus on the Mission Part 2: Who Love God”

August 28, 2011

The mission statement of Maple Grove United Methodist Church is: *to be an open community who love God and serve our neighbors.* A mission statement is, in just a few words, what you're really about, your purpose, what God has called you to do above all else. As we said last week, your mission statement should be short enough to memorize, known by heart by everyone in the church. So let's see if you've got it. Say it with me. The mission of Maple Grove United Methodist Church is *to be an open community of Christians who love God and serve our neighbors.*

Last week we talked about what it means to be an open community—that all kinds of people are one in Christ Jesus, it's not really the church if not everyone is welcome, and people aren't fully welcomed until they've been invited. Today we focus on the second part of the statement—it's our mission *to love God.*

Now, I suspect the truth is that most of us United Methodists do love God, to be sure—but rather reservedly, almost covertly, you might even say subliminally, some of us. Looking back, Mary Lutt writes about a young man she knew in a Mainline Protestant church

who told her he loved God the way his late father loved his family: his wife and kids rarely saw him, yet they knew he cared (although he never said so) because he worked hard and provided well. Shouldn't that be enough? he asked her. That may be enough, she thought, but it isn't all there is.¹

Mild and moderate love for God may be enough, but it surely isn't all there is. And since it's our *mission* to love God, we will not want to love God timidly or tepidly; we will want to love God with all our heart and soul and strength. We will want to love God in such a way that if Jesus should ask us, "Do you love me," why, we'd be hurt that he'd even ask; we'd say, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!" At Maple Grove, loving God is not something we take for granted or do in passing--it's our mission, it's what we do. We love God.

Now I know, despite it being our mission statement, despite it being part of Jesus' Great Commandment, loving God is not something most of us talk about a lot. In writing her article on loving God, Mary Lutt says she tried to count the sermons she'd heard in the last ten years on loving God. She couldn't recall even one. I will

admit to you that in over twenty years of preaching, I'm not sure I've ever preached a whole sermon just about loving God.

Why is that? Well, maybe we feel just a little awkward or embarrassed about how some people show their love for God. Many Methodists look at charismatic or Pentecostal worship and think secretly to ourselves, "That's fine for them, but if that's what you have to do to love God, I'm not sure I've got it in me." Fair enough—it's not my cup of tea either. But we do need to remember that we Methodists are the people of John Wesley who at a prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street in London felt his "heart strangely warmed." He preached to great crowds who were often overcome with emotion and even got slayed in the spirit. Sober and emotionless worship may be enough, but it's not all there is.

Perhaps when it comes to loving God we've been a little wary of the emotional manipulation of some evangelists and TV preachers. I don't believe that sentimental rhetorical tricks are the way to bring people to God. And yet . . . I do remember sitting around a campfire in youth group, singing "Pass It On," and responding with tears to the leader pleading, "Won't you give your heart to Jesus?" I did give him my heart. He's still got it, and I've never forgotten that moment. In

the scene leading up to asking Peter if he loves him, the newly resurrected Jesus cooks breakfast for his disciples on a charcoal fire on the beach. That seems like a pretty emotional setting to me, and I expect they remembered it tenderly the rest of their lives. Leaving mountain top spiritual experiences to youth may be enough, but it's not all there is.

Perhaps when it comes to loving God some of us have settled for a kind of rationalized or philosophical kind of faith. Given our scientific, technological mindset these days, it's challenging for some people even to believe in God, let alone love God. But despite our difficulty describing the exact relationship between God and evolution or explaining precisely how God intervenes to answer prayer, it's important to remember that Christians don't worship some anonymous Higher Power, Aristotle's Prime Mover, or some other god that can be rationally proved to exist. We worship a personal God; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God who called Mary by name; the God Jesus called "Abba, Father." Granting due respect to some Clockmaker in the sky may be enough, but it's not all there is.

Some people say they don't need the doctrine and worship part of Christianity because they love God by serving others. Me too! The parable of the sheep and the goats makes it clear that when you feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned, you are loving Jesus himself. The Bible does say to love God *by* serving your neighbor, but the Bible does not say to serve your neighbor *instead of* loving God. It says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Loving your neighbor may be enough, but even that isn't all there is.

But what if I don't feel that kind of love for God, some people wonder. One of my teachers of prayer, Roberta Bondi, says that it's important to know that contrary to a lot of popular piety, the early church believed that loving God was neither automatic nor easy. In fact, the desert mothers and fathers taught that loving God is *difficult*, something to be learned over a very long time. This is what the Christian disciplines are designed to do. "We must not let ourselves think for one minute," Bondi writes, "that [love for God] is something that arises in our heart as a gift of God's grace from the moment we become Christian. . . . Love," she says, "is the *goal* of Christian life."²

So if you don't feel as much love for God as you'd like, just keep living the Christian life, and in the meantime count your desire to love God as a form of love.

The mission to love God may be difficult and life-long, but it's not rocket science. Mary Lutt teaches that great lovers of God are people who "create conditions of possibility for love." What does it mean to create conditions of possibility for love? Well, she says, if we want to love God wholeheartedly, we begin by praying—not necessarily saying lots of things *to* God, but just spending time *with* God. Great lovers of God, she goes on, put themselves in the way of every kind of beauty to develop the reflexes of awe and delight. They meditate on the Gospels, exposing themselves to Jesus' life of love and acceptance. They hang around God's friends, those people in whose presence you sense that what God has promised is possible. It's how you learn to love God more and more.

Being a Christian without a powerful and warm-hearted love of God may be enough, but it's certainly not all there is. So this morning I ask you, my friends: Do you love Jesus? In fact, just to be

scriptural, I'll ask you three times, and let the response of your heart be, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Ready?

Maple Grove, do you love Jesus? *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!*

Maple Grove, do you love Jesus? *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!*

Maple Grove, do you love Jesus? *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!*

And that's a focus on the second part of our mission, and it doesn't get any better than loving God. Still, next week we focus on serving our neighbors. I can hardly wait! How about you?

¹ J. Mary Lutt, "Keeping the Great Commandment," *The Christian Century* (March 22-29, 2000), 350.

² Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 27-33.