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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 26, 2008

1 Thessalonians 2.1-8  
**Matthew 22.34-46**

### **Loving, Giving—Loving Giving**

“He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’”

—Matthew 22.37

Today we talk about money. (If you’ve been listening carefully, then you’ve heard a bit of talk the last few weeks as well.) We are fortunate in church—we can speak directly with one another. We share a common faith, a common tradition, a common commitment, and a common scripture. Because of this, we don’t need a lot of gimmicks to raise money for the ministry of the church—what we need is to be able to listen together to what the Bible has to say to us about giving, and to attempt to discern the demands of our common faith. For that task, no method is better suited than plain old conversation.

Our Gospel reading for the day is one more account of the religious leaders trying to trip up Jesus. (This happens a lot in the New Testament.) This time, they want him to identify which of the commandments is the greatest. This was a question that was often discussed among rabbis; they are said to have identified 638 commandments in the first five books of the Bible. No doubt, whichever one Jesus chose, they could criticize him for his choice. But, as usual, Jesus didn’t fall for their trap, and instead of choosing one commandment, he combined two together:

“ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22.37-40)

In his answer, Jesus joins together two important parts of Jewish teaching. The first part comes from the book of Deuteronomy and the second comes from the book of Leviticus. Taken together, the two are like a shorthand version of the ten commandments—laws which state our duties to God and to other people. Jesus restates these various duties with a single word: love.

By answering like this, not only did Jesus fail to make the single choice that his enemies wanted, but he also places the commandment to love our neighbors on an equal footing with the commandment to love God. This has some interesting implications for our lives as individuals.

Christianity is an intensely *personal* religion. We are each addressed personally by God, we are each invited personally to accept Christ, and God cares for each of us personally. As the Apostle Paul reminds, each of us must work out our “own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2.12). To a great extent, Christianity is an intensely *personal*, highly *individual* matter. To fully understand the Christian message, we must grasp this fact.

But sometimes we take the truth of the personal nature of Christian faith and twist it into something that is false. It is one thing to say that Christianity is *personal*, it is quite another to say that Christianity is *private*. We are always tempted to make Christianity into something private, into something that is purely between God and “me”, and that has nothing to do with anyone else. If we love God, then we have met the requirements—we have no need for the church, or for anyone else.

Jesus teaches us that personal religion shouldn't lead to private religion. “Jesus' words in Matthew insist that the command to love God and the command to love the neighbor are of equal importance. Not only are they both binding, but they are integrally related.” (Thulin) Jesus has no use for a purely private religion that is only concerned with one's self. Rather he suggests that no person can truly love God who does not also love his or her neighbor. Love of God and love of neighbor are not two separate things, they go together. The greatest commandment is to love God, but the second tells us *how* to do that. We can love God only by loving our neighbor.

Just as individuals are tempted to private religion, so too are congregations. As a group of gathered Christians, we have many “internal” concerns—we have everything from building maintenance projects to committee meetings to choir rehearsals. These things are concerned with the smooth operation of our church, and they are important. They are important because they help to create the environment in which we can all grow as Christians.

Our internal concerns are important, but they are not the last word. The church does not exist simply for its own sake. It exists to do the work of God. It exists to tell the story of this man Jesus Christ, and to promote the love of God and neighbor. This means that a church that is alive and well will be doing more than just caring for its members. It will have an eye turned toward its “neighbors”. We must reach out beyond our walls, otherwise even our *communal* life is in danger of becoming *private*—a “private club” if you will.

I hope that as you think about your money and your church in the coming year, you do so thoughtfully and prayerfully. Church giving is a personal matter, but it shouldn’t be a purely private matter. It is a decision that is too important to make alone—we need to talk to each other, for we all struggle with the same tough issues and we face many of the same fears and anxiety. Through this kind of sharing we can encourage each other to try greater things for God.

Finally, a word must be said about the setting of Jesus’ commandment to love God and neighbor. It was not an abstract rule addressed to all humanity. It was the binding together of two commandments that were the property of God’s chosen people Israel. Through Jesus, they became the property of the Church as well. They are commandments that go along with God’s promise to be our God. They must be heard in light of the life of the one who combined them, the one who died on the cross that we might have life free from the curse of sin and guilt.

If we had never heard God’s promise, if we had never been told the story of Jesus, then the commandment to love God and neighbor might seem like a chore. But we *have* heard, and we *have* been told. Because of this, the commandment to love is not a tiresome chore, but rather a blessed privilege.