



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Focus on Jesus' Way, Pt 2
What's love go to do with it?!

Matthew 22:34–40

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FOCUS ON JESUS' WAY

I am really excited for this theme of Focus on Jesus' Way as an extended moment to reflect, at the beginning of the year and decade, on who we wish to be as followers of Jesus, and how we wish to engage our world. Last week we looked back at how much the world has changed in the last 10 years and how much more it will in the next 10. Often this rate of change leads to fear the world. Remember this quote from Cory Doctorow "It's easy to find fears credible and hopes unbelievable." We took hope in the perseverance the magi to stay focused on a hope that must've seemed unbelievable even over a great distance and in a politically tumultuous and dangerous situation. Though we might tend to think we have it harder now than others who came before us, that's not necessarily the truth.

Today, I'm all about hope, especially for this congregation.

LOVE GOD, LOVE NEIGHBOR

Okay, if we want to focus on Jesus' way, we probably want to start with what we know from Jesus' life and teaching, and scripture is the best place to do that. But what scripture? While we all might have our favorites, I am drawn to the one we know as the Greatest Commandment. Here's why: It appears in three of the four gospels. It draws people back to what was and is age-old wisdom while at the same time allowing for dynamic response to the present situation. And, most importantly, it is Jesus' response when he was asked, "What is the most important thing in life?" so, when looking to boil down Jesus' message to its essence, this is what Jesus said. Let's look at it in Matthew.

Matthew 22:34–40. When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 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.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

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WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

So, it's all about love. But what is love? It's that warm and cuddly feeling we get when we snuggle in front of the fire with loved ones. It's the deep abiding feeling of more-than-satisfaction when put our own interests aside for a moment and serve someone. It's the willingness to sacrifice one's ego, body and very self for the sake of others? Love has many manifestations. It is big and beautiful, deep and wide. It's sometimes reckless, often built into our lives. It motivates our actions and satisfies our soul. What more do we want in life but to begin and end in love?

But love has its twisted, shadow side too. At a personal level, love can be distorted then engaged to serve our own needs. "Yeah, I might manipulate my partner or child, but it's because I love them and don't want them to get hurt." This is often code for "I am afraid they won't need me anymore."

False love also plays out on a large scale: "We have to go to war to kill them before they kill us—don't you love our people more than you love ours?!" This oft-used, thinly veiled argument is a morally weak, and a lazy justification for self-serving violence.

Love fallacies also cast a shadow in places like this, churches: In the church unhealthy avoidance is often excused in the name of love. Biblical scholar Lance Pape says, "Too often in the church, "love" is used as an excuse to take the path of least resistance instead of the path of excellence."

JESUS' LOVE

None of these love fallacies follow the Jesus ethic of love. Let's take a deeper look at what that love does look like. As always, it's important to look at the context in which we draw a verse or two. In this case, it is striking.

In the Gospel of Matthew, this is part of Jesus' last week. Just prior to this, he has thumbed his nose at the political powers in the Triumphal entry, confronted the religious leaders by vandalizing the money-changers tables, and he's on a rhetorical smackdown tour, taking on every challenge from every

religious scholar in Jerusalem who dares to confront him. He even pauses to give a harsh warning to those who do believe in his message and who might get too cocky. All of this *before* the question about the greatest commandment being love. Clearly, Jesus' love has an edge to it.

And after, Jesus continues to trash-talk the scribes and Pharisees, and predicts tough times ahead for Jerusalem. Yes, there was an edge to Jesus' words and actions, *even in the context of love*. So now there must still be an edge to his way that we now follow.

OUR ROARING 20S

My dream for Etown Church of the Brethren for the 2020s is that we continue to sharpen our edge. To sharpen our focus! To become more and more bold in our witness and brave in vision, and loving in our hearts. That's no critique of where we are now—it's encouragement to keep growing and seeking Jesus' way.

We are beautifully positioned. Just think about where we are right now.

WE ARE IN THE PERFECT POSITION TO HEAD INTO OUR ROARING 2020S

We love our mission! Congregational survey results showed that 96% of us believe that our emphasis on Peace, Service and Openness to all should continue, and 85% are excited, or hopeful about the direction of the congregation (another 7% said they are content. 8% said they are frustrated). I'm glad there are some who aren't totally bought in. That perspective will keep us sharp. Besides, only a cult would have 100%.

We are generous and mission driven. Do you realize we gave more than \$2 million in contributions to and through this congregation last year?! We met our operating budget, we went above and beyond to special projects, and contributed more than a million dollars to the building campaign? Wow!

Let's keep it rolling...**We are using our God-given gifts:** The work that you all do, and leadership you show, is unbelievable.

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And our paid positions are filled with excellent people, from front office to pastors to building managers.

We are emotionally strong: We continue to support and love one another through the highs and lows of life.

And there's more: We are hard-working; We are passionate; Our reputation is...well, I'll put it this way: our reputation is what we want it to be with who we want it to be.

Last, but not best, we are beginning to risk being genuinely innovative & imaginative to share Jesus' edgy way of love. Writer Adrienne Maree Brown says, "Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless." This is not unlike Jesus having the divine imagination to proclaim, that loving or neighbor is on par with loving God. Radical imagination has the power to change what we view is possible. And then change reality itself.

Our church board met yesterday for our annual retreat and talked about the ministry priorities we will have in the upcoming year. It's clear that we are looking for more than business as usual. Gleaning insight from the congregational survey done in the fall, several priorities began to take shape:

- **We want to grow closer together spiritually and relationally,** through small groups, special events, particularly those that are intergenerational.
- **We are looking for more robust communication** both within and beyond the Etown CoB community of faith. No hiding our light under a bushel!
- **We want to amplify our peace witness.** Like Jesus in Jerusalem, we're not interested in playing it safe for the propriety's sake, fear of being labeled, or fear of antagonism.
- **And, we want to grow.** We want to get the building done, and done right, but let's go! Because we want to spread this message of love, peace, service and openness to all.

Our edges are far from rusty here at Etown CoB. We are growing in so many ways. And we plan to keep sharpening this edge and honing this focus.

INNOVATIVE

Given all of this (!), which is a lot, I want to close with a few more decade-long ideas that are worth some thought as we enter our Roaring 20s—new decade of loving God and loving neighbor.

Let me start with the most boring one first. **We must develop a more effective system for congregational governance** that is less bureaucratic and cumbersome. A governance system that enables us to be more nimble and responsive, while still representing the will of the body and engendering trust.

Get comfortable with growth. We are typically more comfortable serving the community as a people of faith who are doing something service related, whether it's building homes, volunteering at food banks and winter shelters, even speaking out prophetically on controversial issues like peace and immigration and interfaith understanding. I think we are beginning to see the joy in inviting people to join us as a community of service AND a community of worship. A place where we love neighbor AND love God. No, we don't want to be LCBC. And we do want to have strong and deep relationships with one another. But there is a tug that we are sensing: who is God calling us to be as a worship community? And we're wondering if that has numerical restrictions. Growth opportunities could include having more than one worship service a week, a new church start locally or far away, or doubling down on our online church experience.

Practice Failure. We must always be piloting new programs, ministries and approaches to ministry to share who we are along Jesus' way. Yes, that means some things will fall flat—and, yes, others will take off.

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LAST, I WANT TO SHARE A STORY, ONE THAT IS TAKING OFF AND DREAM ABOUT ITS FUTURE

Our Roaring 20s could see us serve our sisters and brother in the denomination from a position of love and strength. Last week I shared that the Church of the Brethren is struggling. What I didn't go into is that we just might have a unique opportunity to lead and serve the denomination.

The terrain is shifting. The withdrawal of many large, high profile and extremely conservative congregations is changing the landscape. I think about it this way. Though this congregation and its pastors have never been all that wild or unorthodox, the departure of these conservative congregations—with more departure to come—has landed us much closer to the middle of the spectrum.

Couple that shift with the fact that we are one of the very few who are healthy and growing, and we are poised to serve the denomination, especially congregations who are smaller in number and may need a boost. Consider this...Let me share a story of one of our ministries that could play:

- We originally started videoing worship so we could share with partner congregations, the Cincinnati and University Park Churches of the Brethren and the hopes that we could get that to our shut-ins so they could feel more connected.
- That's worked. We have an average of 20+ live viewers each week. Now, when the weather is too dicey to drive, our online worship community doubles. When some of you go to Florida in a few weeks, you'll stay connected every Sunday. But that only begins to come close to the number of view we get each week. We did not realize just how far reaching it would indeed become.
- Our video ministry now gets about 80–150 views per week. 150! Now we know that some of those views

are some of you who didn't understand when the preacher was mumbling.

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- What we really underestimated was the number of viewers who join us either live or on delay from across the country and world. We now have regular viewers from California, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, and Florida. Some of these people who have had some connection to this congregation and now live far away. But—and this is where we have serious potential—many don't have a church nearby that shares our theological message. Some of these are Church of the Brethren folks who don't have a Church of the Brethren nearby, or what they consider a viable, vibrant or theologically compatible Church of the Brethren close by. I don't want to out anyone, but some of our regular viewers are from our seminary and national staff.

What would it look like to develop these relationship? Realizing that isn't a one way service project. As we've seen with our partner congregations, we too, here in Etown benefit from these partnerships.

The hour is late. I should stop for now. I am honored to be on this journey with you as we sharpen our edges for loving God and neighbor.

BENEDICTION

Next week...we are going to look at how we as a congregation focus on who we are as a people of Justice.

