

In the coming weeks, our worship services will reflect on the Covenant of Grace around which our congregation is gathered. Today's sermon reflects on the Statement of Identity that opens our covenant. It reads:

*Believing that we have been called of God to gather this community of grace, we are members of this body of Christ by the bond of covenant—our solemn commitment to God and to one another.*

***We walk together by faith in God, Creator of the universe and Lord of all people.*** *The source of our faith flows from the recorded experience of God in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the evidence of God in nature, and the presence of God in human life. Having experienced the wonder of Christian love, our faith in God proceeds from the confession of early Christians, "God is love." (1 John 4:8) We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world (2 Cor. 5:19), yet we set no limit on the reach of God's love or the activity of God beyond the experience and faith of Christians. We are striving to live out the calling of Christ, "'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.'" (Mt 22:37-38)*

For several years I have been tuning into the NPR weekly call-in program "Car Talk" on Saturday mornings listening to Tom and Ray, otherwise known as Click and Clack the Tappet Brothers. The hosts are actually very good mechanics who also happen to be very funny and entertaining even if their humor is a bit juvenile. The fact that Rufus Ritchie and I have often compared notes on the weekly episodes probably indicates the level of dignity the show commands. One of the features of "Car Talk" is "Stump the Chumps" in which previous callers are interviewed about the success of the advice given on the show.

Reading the Gospel passages on the interrogation of Jesus by the "Scribes and Pharisees" reminds me of "Stump the Chumps." In Mark, Jesus is asked to defend his authority, to authorize paying taxes to Caesar, to explain the resurrection of the dead, and finally to discern the greatest of the commandments in the Law. The game was the norm for exposing ignorance and measuring the wisdom of aspiring rabbis. Rabbinic teachings usually involved something like parables or story-time and a period of Q and A. Unlike the Greek philosophers, Jewish wisdom did not offer long dissertations defining the nature of God and explaining the universe. Like the Old Testament Proverbs of Solomon, the wise rabbi was identified with proverbial wisdom—short, practical advice about how to live a successful life and how to please God. Given the timing in the Gospels associated with passion week, the interrogation of Jesus took the normal questioning of rabbis to another level, not only to discredit Jesus before the people but to find cause for his arrest and execution by the Romans. Matthew's account leads to the litany of judgment on the Pharisees initiated by Jesus' statement, "woe to you." Luke's account has Jesus asking the scribe/lawyer which is the great commandment. The scribe then recites the *Shema Israel* and the Golden Rule, which Jesus affirms. Luke's conversation then focuses on the parable of the Good Samaritan and the question put to Jesus, "who is my neighbor?" Only in Mark, the scribe interrogating Jesus responds to with a commentary on the great commandment. Only in Mark, is Jesus found blessing a scribe.

Two issues are at stake in Mark: the priority of service to God through Temple sacrifice and the complex teachings of the Pharisees. Jesus takes the mantle of the Old Testament prophet, "to obey is better than sacrifice," that also looks beyond the structures and institutions of the Temple. Shaking down the Law to a great commandment was not original with Jesus. Rabbi Hillel responded to the game "stump the chump" with a challenge to teach the Torah while standing on one foot. He responded, "What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow; this is the whole law. All the rest is a commentary to this law; go and learn it." The *Shema Israel* was the first prayer taught to the child and the final prayer at death, said on awakening in the morning and on going to sleep at night. To love the neighbor as oneself is not original with Jews or Christians. The simplicity of the great commandment, however, was a far cry from the 613 commandments of the Pharisees including 365 prohibitions and 248 positive precepts including grades of lesser and greater commands.

***Building a church or a life begins at the foundation.*** From the outset, we decided to ground our church in a covenant commitment to God and to one another. Denominational churches are characterized by an authoritative creed or confessional statement that determines and limits the faith character of the community. Reformed churches cite the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith, Lutherans refer to the 1580 Book of Concord, Roman Catholics catalogue the Councils and papal encyclicals, Southern Baptists of late claim authority in their "Baptist Faith and Message" (revised), and numerous evangelical Protestant bodies simply claim the Bible. The creeds and confessions of church history have influenced all of us either by reaction or imitation, whether or not we are willing to endorse one denominational claim to truth. The warfare between

and within churches over the centuries has often been like the wars between nations; they battle over borders, over peripheral, usually trivial, matters. The conflict between parties in Judaism and the controversy over Jesus in the Gospels that led to his statement of the great commandment was little different from the conflict that has plagued the church for more than nineteen centuries. The problem seems to focus on gathering and understanding human language in the definition of orthodoxy rather than on the positive commitment of people to God and to one another. When we began to gather a church in early 2004, we had one thing in common above all else; we were tired of waging war and calling it church.

Our intention as a covenant church, whether or not we have achieved it, was to focus on our faith commitment, the heart, not on theological definitions of God or descriptions of the right church. Ironically, we had to use human language to say what we believed, and here we are four years later generating conversation about the meaning of our words. Believing that the Word of God is greater than all human words demands a level of humility in theological language that has often been ignored in the authority statements of the church through the centuries. If you are like me, you are tired of the church as a battleground. Both the church and the Christian life rise from a foundation of faith commitment to a loving God expressed in our care of one another on planet earth.

I set out on the journey of pastoral ministry in November, 1962, in a cotton farming community outside of Dallas, Texas. I was a second year seminarian and a weekend pastor. One of my first problems as a pastor was to deal with a sinking church building. The soil known as "black gumbo" was a dark clay that turned to concrete when it was dry and to a sticky muck when wet. Most of the buildings in the area were set on floating foundations that could "float" with either the dry or the wet movement of the soil. Our church building was constructed on the low area of the lot; it stayed wet most of the time allowing the floors to rise and fall like the tides on the coast. One Saturday deacon Ewell Smith and I went under the floor to find the low spots and level the floors, as we dodged spiders and centipedes and thought about snakes, Ewell chuckled that the folks who constructed that building should have paid more attention to Jesus' parable of the man who built his house on the sand. He was right. Nothing else matters if the foundations are not firm.

***The loving character of God lies at the foundations of authentic religion.*** American Fundamentalism was a child birthed by the head-on conflict of modern science and the biblical world view. Fundamentalism, thus, was born not by love between parents, but of war over the definition of truth. The focus on orthodoxy of the Princeton theologians was visited on Tennessee in the 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton that pitted William Jennings Bryan against Clarence Darrow in a battle over the Bible that continues to be fought today over creationism and/or "Intelligent Design." Later Fundamentalism came to be identified with the "fundamentals," the essential beliefs of the Christian faith: the inerrancy of Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and his bodily return at the end of history.

I cut my teeth on Fundamentalist theology and the footnotes of the Scofield Bible. I grew to perceive the Achilles' heel of Fundamentalism lies in its failure to identify the foundations; it is consumed with peripherals. Furthermore, Fundamentalism derives its energy from opposition and warfare rather than an affirmative commitment to loving God and God's children. Jesus said it right: "by their fruits, you shall know them."

If we really want to get to the bottom of the gospel of Jesus Christ, maybe we ought to take our clue from the affirmation of faith in the Gospels rather than our superficial reconstruction of fundamentals. Jesus summarized his faith, Jewish and later Christian, in loving God and our neighbors. We cannot get any more fundamental than the great commandment, but we can learn from Jesus to cast our vision to the larger picture of God's world. Loving God and neighbor is not just Christian or Jewish; the call can be located in authentic religion around the globe. Thus, our covenant states: "our faith in God proceeds from the confession of early Christians, 'God is love'(1 John 4:8). . . yet we set no limit on the reach of God's love or the activity of God beyond the experience and faith of Christians."

The most essential statement we can make about God is, "God is love"; thus, the most essential religious act is loving God with heart and soul and mind with every atom in your body and every dimension of your life. That is the measure of authentic religion. Authentic religion does not kill heretics, go on Crusades against Muslims, bring neighbors to trials of orthodoxy called Inquisition, fly airplanes into tall buildings, send suicide bombers into crowds of innocent people, or shoot down innocent children. We might add that it does not battle over the Bible, condemn people to hell for using different language, and split churches over styles of worship. Authentic religion is devoted to loving God.

If we take the *Shema Israel* at the center of our worship, the Golden Rule flows naturally from our faith. John the Elder stated the case most clearly: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen (1 John 4:20)." Maybe the scribe/lawyer in Luke was right. The whole issue of religion comes down

to the question, "who is my neighbor?" The only orthodoxy that matters is the love we express toward all of the people of the earth made in the divine image. We must love all those whom God loves.

In a word, our faith is about character not about words. The God who is love is working to make us a loving people.