

Greetings members and friends of the First Congregational Church of Shelburne,

This week's Worship Resource is attached. This service combines prayers from the era of the Reformation in Europe (1500's) and the formulation of the greatest commandment spoken by Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew. The Reformation opened the doors to new forms of worship, the freeing of the sacrament of communion, and a greater participation of the laity in the life and ministry of the church. The greatest commandment granted clarity concerning what is most important in the life of the faithful.

Our next, and final, Parking Lot Service for the year will be on Sunday November 1, 10:30 AM. This is All Saints Day and Communion. Please make your reservation by contacting Diantha at 413-625-6592 or by email foxtowne@gmail.com. Since this service will include Communion, we are asking those who participate to bring grape juice, or another appropriate beverage, and bread with them.

Following the service on November 1st there will be a Special Meeting of the Congregation. This is an important meeting in the life of the church. An amendment to the By Laws is being proposed that will allow the congregation the option of voting through a digital platform when face to face meetings are deemed untenable. A call to the meeting and the By Law amendment has already been sent. If you have not received one and you are a voting member of the congregation please contact the Church Clerk, Diantha.

Faithfully Yours,

Pastor Rob

Welcome to Sunday Worship
October 25, 2020

Good Morning to our members and friends at home,

This week's Worship Resource combines prayers from the era of the Reformation in Europe (1500's) and the formulation of the greatest commandment spoken by Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew. The Reformation opened the doors to new forms of worship, the freeing of the sacrament of communion, and a greater participation of the laity in the life and ministry of the church. The greatest commandment granted clarity concerning what is most important in the life of the faithful.

Prayer Requests: We are accepting requests for prayer (healing, comfort, thanksgiving, and others). Please send your requests to the Pastor at pastor01089@gmail.com. Requests will then be sent out through our email list to the congregation for our common prayer life during the week. PLEASE remember that all prayer requests received become public knowledge. If you are uncertain if your request for another might be confidential, do not send it.

And now let us be in worship

Call to Worship Queen Elizabeth, 1552

The eyes of all things look up and trust in thee, O Lord. Thou dost open thy hand and fillest with thy blessing every living thing. Good Lord, bless us all and all thy gifts, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Morning Unison Prayer & the Lord's Prayer

Martin Luther, 1530

We give thanks unto thee, heavenly father, through Jesus Christ thy dear son. That thou hast protected us through the night from all danger and harm, and we beseech thee to preserve and keep us this day also. We pray this in name of Jesus who taught us to pray together saying...*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Prayers of the People

This morning prayers are a collection from various writers and Reformers during the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 1500's. They are:

Martin Luther, Germany, 1530

Elizabeth, Queen of England, 1552

Francis Bacon, England, 1561

John Calvin, Switzerland, 1539

Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, England, 1549

Johann Arndt, Germany, 1585

Thomas More, weeks before his execution in England, July 6, 1535

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent that my love may go out to my neighbor. Amen.

The Eyes of all things do look up and trust in thee, o Lord. Thou givest them their meat in due season, thou dost open thy hand and fillest with thy blessing every living thing. Good Lord, bless us all and all thy gifts, which we receive of thy bounteous liberality, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We humbly and earnestly ask that human things may not prejudice us, but rather, O Lord, that our minds being thoroughly cleansed and purged and subject to the divine will, there may be given unto faith the things that are faiths, that we may continually attain to a deeper knowledge and love of thee, who art the fountain of light.

O Lord, Heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of light and wisdom; enlighten our minds by thy holy spirit, and give us grace to receive thy word with reverence and humility, without which no man can understand thy truth, for Christ's sake. Amen

O Lord, our God, grant to us in times of trouble to be patient without murmuring or despair, and in prosperity to acknowledge thy gifts, and confess that all our endowments come from thee. Give us, by thy Holy Spirit, a willing heart and a ready hand to use all thy gifts to thy praise and glory, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

We confess before thee, in sorrow, how hard and unsympathetic are our hearts; how often we have sinned against our neighbors. Give us grace ever to alleviate the crosses and difficulties of those around us, teach us to be consolers in sorrow, to take thought for the stranger, the widow, the orphan. Let our charity show itself not in words only, but in deed and truth. Amen.

Give me the grace, Good Lord, to set the world at nought, to set my mind fast on thee and not to hold upon the blasts of men's mouths. Gladly to be thinking of God, piteously to call for his help, to lean upon the comfort of God, busily to labor to love him. Amen.

Hear, O Lord, our prayers, spoken from our hearts,
Grant that in their offering, we may listen for your voice...

May these our prayers rise to you as incense and may you answer them not according to our desire but according to your holy will. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 22: 34-46
Love Lifted Me

This morning's Gospel Lesson is a continuation of the passage we heard last week. Jesus has been in a tag team match with the Sadducees and the Pharisees in the Temple in Jerusalem. Having answered the question put before him by the Sadducees concerning God, Caesar, and taxes, the Pharisees step into the ring with a lawyer.

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.*"

Here ends the reading from the Gospel according to Matthew

After the reading, you may reflect on this passage and share your thoughts.

There is a set of notes concerning this text for your reflection.

Benediction: John Calvin, Switzerland, 1539

Grant, almighty God, since thou art pleased kindly to invite us to thyself, and hast consecrated thy Word for our salvation, that we may willingly, and from the heart, obey thee, and become teachable. May we be so planted in the courts of thine house, that we may grow and flourish, and that fruit may appear through the whole course of our life, until we shall at length enjoy that blessed life which is laid up for us in heaven, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes on the text

What is the greatest commandment? Jesus is asked. This is a question of the law, a question of the Torah, the law given to Moses. The catch is to see how Jesus would answer this. As a teacher? As a prophet? As the messiah? This is the self-aggrandizing assumption the Pharisees were looking for. That Jesus sees himself as more than a teacher and more than another prophet. They want to finally corner and humiliate Jesus, and this is their last volley. While Jesus has any number of reasons to speak for himself, he simply allows Moses to speak. Jesus quotes

Moses to interpret Moses. He shows how in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 Moses himself clarifies the matter. *Love God* says Moses. *Love your neighbor as yourself* says Moses. *On this hangs all the law and the prophets* says Jesus. That's it! Touché! Game, set, match! While I do like this passage because it is here that I am allowed to witness Jesus win against any and all opposition, brazenly, brilliantly, as opposed to his stoic silence in front of Pilate prior to his crucifixion, I have come to the conclusion that there are few passages with more power than Jesus' summary of the law. He does not offer micro ethics, a checklist of what to do, or exactly what to believe, do this, do that, believe this, in this way. Rather Jesus offers a meta ethic, a worldview, a way of seeing ourselves, of seeing others, and seeing God in this wild ride of life. The law that Jesus buts forth as an overarching theme is: everything.

Everything? Everything! is to be founded in love. I have come to the realization that this meta ethic, this Christian world view, this overarching theme for life, is the greatest rub for those who are serious and experienced in their faith. It is so easy to presume that strength of character and moral uprightness are the goals of the Christian faith. And in many ways, they are. It is easy to presume that espousing obedience to God is the highest value. And in many ways, it is. But there is something about love, I suggest, that stands just above them, and Jesus understood that. He understood that love supersedes the letter of the law every time. Want to argue ethics? Want to discern what is of God and what is not? Want to know what Jesus would do? Then answer the question. *What is loving in this situation?* I can't help it, every time I read this passage and I get to the second half of the great commandment, *love your neighbor as yourself*, the voice of one of my colleagues in the ministry comes back to me and whispers in my ear, *but what if I have extremely low self-esteem? What if I am unable to love myself? How can I possibly love God, or my neighbor? If everything is to be founded in love, what happens if I have no love to be founded in?* True story. Everyday Rodney would look in the mirror, feel the irrepressible urge to look away and often he did. Rodney was weighed down by incredible guilt, a guilt so heavy, that it had become the controlling force in his life. He could not accept himself. He could not love himself. For he had made one crucial mistake in his life, and it had cost the lives of three people. Three people who had placed their trust in him when he stepped behind the wheel of his car. The accident was his fault. He was laughing, not paying attention, eyes not on the road. The next thing he remembered knowing was that he was alive, while the others had died. He thought of his attitude of extreme guilt as accepting responsibility for his actions. In reality he had gone far beyond that. Weighed down by the incredible guilt of causing the deaths of others, and the unimaginable pain to their families and friends, he had moved. Changed jobs. He had come to hate himself. His self-hatred had taken a tremendous amount of energy. He was bitter and withdrawn, unable to look himself in the eye. And then, Tommy and his folks had moved into the house next door. Tommy was five years old, and not the least bit put off by Rodney's attitude. *How come yer so angry all th' time, Mr. Winter?* Tommy asked one day. *Mind your own business, kid,* Rodney had snapped back. Tommy paid no attention. He kept on asking those questions day after day. Finally, Rodney had to take a long look at who he had become. One day, everything changed, just like the that one awful day so many years ago. Rodney thought of this day as his rebirth. On that day, Rodney was sitting out on his front steps, he was convinced of his worthlessness, his guilt had become all consuming, and now, he was considering the best way to end it all. He had decided to take his own life. In the midst of this suicidal internal dialogue, Tommy had come running over from next door and without

hesitation, he had flung his arms around Rodney's neck. Tommy's body followed his arms and he landed firmly in Rodney's lap. *I love you, Mr. Winter*, Tommy had chirped. *And you just looked like you could use a hug.* Rodney now stares into his own eyes, reflected in the mirror every day. He doesn't feel the irrepressible urge to look away. He is finally beginning to accept himself. Even to like himself. He knows he still has some distance to go. But he now knows about love. Love of God, love of neighbor. In reflecting upon this text this week, it occurs to me that we don't necessarily have an issue with what Jesus says, *Love God and neighbor*. Even though we do have issues with implementing love of neighbor, I don't think any of us would contest Jesus' world view. I do think, for the moment anyway, that we do get complacent and comfortable and let the power of what Jesus offers fade into the background. Marshall McLuhan used the concept of environmentalism to explain why people lose enthusiasm and vibrancy. By environmentalism, he meant all those things around us to which we grow accustomed to the extent that they become the background against which we live our lives. Families, friends, work, school, and even our faith can become part of our background environment instead of being the exciting forefront of our lives. Even the greatest commandment can blend into the background as we hear it time and again. As a pastor it doesn't take too much for everything that I hold to be sacred and holy to become my background. Theology, bible, prayer, and sacraments are all so much a part of my professional life that it is easy for them to become tools of the trade instead of instruments of a living faith. The sanctuary can become a workspace instead of a sacred environment for the love of God. I can remember how as a child I walked softly through the sanctuary because I thought it was seriously holy ground. God's living room. I wasn't so sure I wanted to bump into God. It is relatively easy, if I'm not paying attention, to walk through the sanctuary as though it is my own living room. I think this is true when it comes to the invitation to live life as the Lord intended it. In the church we struggle to provide ministries that sustain others and ourselves, but the passionate love of God and the unrelenting love of neighbor, often becomes the background, rather than being the foreground of our lives. Sometimes, it takes a story like the Rodney's to bring the love of God and the love of neighbor back to the foreground of our lives as individual Christians and as a congregation. Amen