

Hard Work and Self-Reliance

Ukama Sunday

Matthew 22:34-46

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Oct 18, 2020

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Matthew 22:34-46

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.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

“Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” This famous reminder to live out our faith in all areas of our lives is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, although it is doubtful that he actually said it. Whoever did first speak those wise words, “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words,” certainly made a good point. Our actions do matter. What’s more: actions usually do speak louder than words, even though words are powerful healers or weapons. People are watching what we do more than listening to what we say. It’s been said that people forget what has been said, but remember how they had been made to feel.

Does someone walk away after a conversation with you and feel that they had been heard, that someone really listened to them, or that you were bored and distracted?

Have you shared a goal, a dream, a concern and found it was received with grace and tenderness, or did it seem to have been dismissed and glossed over?

How we live out the message, the great commandments, of Jesus, how we preach the gospel at all times, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves is an intentional, active, genuine, embodied faith.

To love God with all our heart means to love God with all our emotions, whether things are going well, or we are challenged and despairing, or when God seems silent or distant. All our heart means at all times. It means to live from a heart of gratitude, attention, awareness, generosity, connection and justice; especially when it is not simple or popular in the midst of the status quo, so an easy compromise is tempting.

To love God with all our soul means to love God with devotion, with the innate part of us that always knew that we were created by a loving God, and in God's own image. We reflect that love from our God-shaped hole within when we appreciate the intricacies of the universe, the intricacies of life itself. Our soul takes us much farther, much deeper, than our heart ever can.

To love God with all our mind means to love God with our reason and intellect. What we read, what we speak, what we think, all reflect our faith in ways that can make us less easily distracted by a world that is constantly trying to defeat, entice, and discourage us. And it also means to be content to live in the mystery of faith questions that we cannot answer, and the things that we cannot understand.

To love our neighbors as ourselves calls us to first love ourselves, which is something we all struggle with at some time or another in our lives, and then to affirm how God has loved us so in return we offer others—neighbors and strangers- a grace that nurtures, welcomes, serves, protects and shares with them without borders, boundaries or distinctions.

“Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” These words also fairly well capture in a neat and clever ‘bumper sticker’ or ‘tweet’ the message that Paul wrote in his very first letter to the churches, as he, and his missionary companions Silvanus and Timothy, who had courage in God and had been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, not to please mortals, but to please God who tested their hearts. Together they shared with the Thessalonians not only the Gospel, but were also able to be vulnerable and confident to share their own selves because the Thessalonians had become very dear to them. The willingness to be vulnerable to share themselves, and to be confident in their faith, as they met others, as they met strangers who unexpectedly soon became very dear to them, preached the Gospel with and without words. This was their lesson for the new church in Thessalonica, and for us centuries later.

Loving God with our heart, soul and mind, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and declaring the Gospel, does require a courageous willingness to live out what we know, no matter our doubts, insecurities and failings along the way. Seminary professor Holly Hearon describes this courage to preach the Gospel at all times in this way, “We often associate courage with bravery, or even bravado, but courage can take many forms. It strikes me that courage is related to confidence. It is a confidence, however, that is less about being right than being comfortable in our own skin. It is a confidence that allows us to remain non-defensive when challenged; to listen respectfully to others recognizing that God may be speaking to us through them; a confidence that is not smug, but generous. This confidence translates into a courage that enables us to take a step outside our comfort zone, to risk more than we've been willing to risk before, to work alongside people who are new to us, and to trust that God, who has entrusted us with the Gospel, will help us to discern what it means to be a faithful witness in each new context and encounter.”

These words are true for us, just as they are for our Ukama partnership with the United Church of Christ, Zimbabwe. Missionaries traveled there and had experiences not unlike those of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, sharing the Gospel in words and actions, and creating relationships that became dear to everyone. Protestant Christianity has now become by far the dominant religion in Zimbabwe even though politics and persecution coexist, so that they know exactly what Paul meant when he wrote that he and his missionary coworkers had suffered and been shamefully mistreated, yet had courage in God to declare the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. On this day when we lift up our Ukama partnership, recognizing that God is speaking to us through them, and that through us God is speaking to them, we reflect on the courage, journey and faith of our United Church of Christ siblings, who now not only experience the isolation and losses of the Covid-19 pandemic as we do, but boldly continue to live under a corrupt leadership in which literacy is high, yet jobs of any kind are sparse; when farmland is not able to be managed well and the ever present threat of food insecurity is now even greater, while the healthcare system is fragile and fragmented, they continue to be encouraged by faith in their action, through living out Jesus' great commandments with a courageous willingness, and their core values of hard work and self-reliance.

In the monetary gift that we are sending to our faith siblings in Zimbabwe that contributes the relief of their food insecurity, in the prayers we lift to God for peace, healing, hope and justice to prevail, and in the awareness and solidarity of their unimaginable plight, may we continue to preach and receive the Gospel. As we are lifted in the prayers of our faith siblings in Zimbabwe, may we remember that through the Ukama partnership we have become very dear to each other. Amen.