

“The Distracted Life”

February 5, 2017

Loving Large series – Holy Communion & Souper Bowl of Caring

(NOTE: Portions of this sermon are taken from “Loving Large” by Jacob Armstrong. I’ve adapted this series for use at Lake Harbor UMC.)

It was one of the most important questions ever asked: *“Which command in God’s Law is the most important?”*

They had him. There was no right answer. How could he give one answer saying one was more important than the other, when they were all sacred? For the first time he would trip over his words. But he didn’t. Jesus’ answer echoes through the centuries.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.” Eugene Peterson says, “passion, prayer, and intelligence.” But Jesus shared a phrase every Jew would’ve known. It would’ve been recited in their worship services as a part of the Shema that we read in Deuteronomy. This was nothing new. They had heard it a thousand times.

Just as they considered Jesus’ answer, though, he kept talking. “This is the most important - the first on any list. But there’s a second to set alongside it.”

They had only asked for one. They had only asked for the greatest commandment. But Jesus didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. “There is another commandment that is so like the first that they go hand in hand. I will not give you just one.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Or Peterson’s words: “Love others as well as you love yourself.” This was a little more obscure. It’s found in the Book of Leviticus sandwiched in between dozens of other rules. Remember the 613 laws? It’s right next to “don’t mate different kinds of animals,” and “don’t wear cloth woven of two kinds of materials.” But to Jesus it was of almost equal importance to the first.

The video we saw earlier said it: *Love is the greatest thing we can do. Love God. Love people. For Jesus, everything hangs on love.* Peterson says, “These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs on from them.”

And Jesus’ answer silenced the crowd. All of us read or see stories about people who show great love for others because of their love for God. Images of Mother Teresa come to mind for me – this small woman who did great things, but it happens every day. I think about people I know, people in our congregation, who have cared for others, loved sacrificially, and given generously - much of the time never noticed and never known.

And it’s beautiful thing to witness love that makes a difference. But sometimes we miss it. We hear a lot of troubling news about our world: national unrest, terrorism, hunger, and poverty, economic challenges. Our world is described in all kinds of ways:

unstable, volatile, greedy, unjust. What we don't here is one word that also describes our world: distracted.

Our world is filled with children of God made to love God and love God's children. But when our world becomes a world that runs on anything else—money, power, fear, greed—we become a world that's distracted from the foundational command that Jesus gives.

We were made to love God and to love each other. Jesus says if we could just get that right, all of the other things and all of the other questions would fall into place. It sounds so simple, and yet it's so profound – and difficult for all of us.

I can get distracted from thinking that love really does change the world, but I shouldn't. I hear it all the time when people share that they've been affected by the kindness of this congregation. We just received another thank you note from a teacher at Ross Park who is so grateful for the school supplies she received this year. You've heard about how families are overwhelmed with thanks when they received shoes and boots for their kids from Shoes for Shores. Today we're collecting soup that will feed people who are hungry in our community. Those acts of love that are offered in response to God's love in our lives make a difference.

Maybe it sounds too idealistic or unrealistic, but if we are moved from distracted lives to lives focused on the love of God for us, our love for God, and sharing that love with our neighbors, it's possible to change the world.

Over the next few weeks, we'll focus on loving large and changing the world. Each week, we'll have an opportunity to support a local mission organization. Today we're joining with others around the world to share soup with those in need. This idea for Souper Bowl came from a youth group that wanted to do something to serve others, and it's become a national movement to engage people on Super Bowl Sunday.

We know we're distracted. (SLIDE - **Weapons of Mass Distraction**) Now there are benefits to all of these applications, and we hear more and more about the effects of technology all the time. But devices, social media, and even the pace of TV affect our ability to focus.

A 2015 article in *Time* magazine said, "The average attention span for the notoriously ill-focused goldfish is nine seconds, but according to a new study from Microsoft Corp., people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds, highlighting the affects of an increasingly digitalized lifestyle on the brain." We are easily distracted.

And we feel the effects of distraction. Sometimes in our family relationships and friendships, at work, and even at home, we feel like people want something from us, rather than just to know us and be with us. And if we're honest, sometimes we perpetuate the same thing. Even at church we're trying to get so many things done that we focus on the task rather than the person.

But Jesus reminds us that we're not made to live a distracted life. I used to pride myself on being able to multi-task - to be able to make dinner, help my kids with homework, answer my E-mail, and the list goes on. (SLIDE - **Multi-tasking**)

But then I heard one of my colleagues say that none of us is really able to multi-task. His opinion was that we're simply not able to do anything well if we're trying to do so many things at once. Honestly, I felt totally duped and even told him so.

But ultimately, I think he's right. We're not made to attend to ten different things at the same time - and really not doing any one thing well. Jesus boils it down - we're actually made to do something—to love God and love others.

And yet most of us are probably operating from the distracted life. That's why we get frustrated with the checkout guy or gal when he or she is slow, when traffic is at a stand-still on the highway, why we snap at one another. Ultimately, the distracted life thinks only of what others can do for me. But the focused life considers how others need love.

The distracted life most easily sees the negative, the insufficiencies, and the weaknesses in others. We can find them if we look for them because we all have them. But the focused life sees the worth of all people.

Living a distracted life, we can't find enough time for everything. When we're not focused, we don't have enough time for anything. When we focus again on being a person who loves God and loves others, our purpose isn't to get everything in the world done, to make everybody happy, or to do everything perfectly. Our focus is on loving God and loving people. The focused life sees each day as an opportunity to share God's love.

I've found myself distracted many times. One place that I've sometimes struggled is in truly being present with people. It's more than just going to the hospital or visiting someone at home, but truly listening and hearing them.

This week, I watched my dear friend and her family as her mom declined and then passed away. I noticed that her focus was clear. She has two young daughters, a spouse, and lots of work at her job, but she was focused. She was clear that her place was with her mom, and those moments she had were so precious. It was important perspective.

I had the joy of visiting some of members who are homebound and in care facilities. Sometimes I go in with the "task" in mind - to make a visit. This week, I found myself so blessed to share Communion with one of our members and a friend who sat at her table at lunch. Even as I thought about getting something done, I was challenged to understand that being present isn't just about what I'm doing; it's about how I see a person's faith and hope and am blessed by it.

As part of loving large, we'll be challenged each week. As we come to the table where Jesus is host today, I invite us to consider the first commandment that Jesus offers - to love God. This meal draws us to God and draws us together. How can we

come to the table not seeing it as something we're doing, but as an act of worship and thanksgiving?

How can we take five minutes every day this week - not to accomplish anything or produce anything or getting something done, but to sit before God and offer our love and praise to God? Maybe you'll pray, give thanks, hum a song, or just be in silence. We can't do any of the world-changing stuff for others if we don't first have a heart that loves God.

May God help us. Thanks be to God! AMEN.