

Hung Up

A Sermon for Worship with Communion on the First Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 5, 2017

Text: Matthew 22:34-40

Lent has begun and thus it seems only fitting that I should begin with a confession. Nothing too startling, and yet a weakness I feel compelled to acknowledge as we make our journey through Lent together. I confess ... when I get bored I take out my phone and check out what's happening on Facebook. If the television show I'm watching has too many commercials in a row, I reach for my phone. If the grocery line is inching along, my phone is in my hand. Waiting to pick up something or someone, I'll go early so I can sit in my car and scroll through the latest stuff on Facebook while I wait. I'll even use checking on Facebook as a stalling technique when there is something I need to do that I don't feel like tackling. Like, for instance, writing a sermon on a Saturday afternoon.

Yes, there it is. The truth comes out. As much as I like to preach, there are times when I just don't feel like sitting down for 3-4 hours to get one ready. So, I do what anyone does when faced with a task they don't want to deal with. I stall. I putter. I make myself a cup of tea. I play with the dog. Gradually, I make my way to my laptop, to check out the latest news – just in case there is something sermon worthy there, even though there seldom is. And then, since the Facebook app is so close to the news app, I

click on Facebook – again, just to make sure nothing sermon worthy has popped up, which it seldom does. Until today, that is.

Imagine my surprise when the first item in my Facebook feed was a posting by another UCC pastor, someone I know and respect, who admits to fiddling around on Facebook on a Saturday afternoon because writing her sermon has her stumped. I immediately hit “like” delighted I was not the only pastor dealing with this dilemma. After another minute or so, I turned off the laptop to begin making more notes for my sermon. After I had posted some receipts to the checkbook and made yet another cup of tea, I sat down and made notes for the sermon. Soon I was ready to write and I turned the laptop on once again. I thought, what can it hurt? I’ll just check Facebook real quick, just to see what’s happening. And once again the first item in my feed was this same post from a colleague, only now, only an hour or so later, it had 84 likes and about a half dozen comments from other pastors facing exactly the same situation. Across the country, UCC pastors were struggling with their sermons for the first Sunday in Lent. We were all hung up on this task, in one way or another. I felt completely vindicated.

We were not all attempting to preach on the same thing, although most were hung up on the Lectionary passage today, the traditional story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert from Matthew’s Gospel. Since I was struggling with a different text, I

stopped and read that text. “Oh, that would be much easier to preach on than this one,” I lamented. And as soon as I thought that, I realized they would probably look at the text I’ve chosen from Matthew and think the same thing. Sort of the pastor’s version of the “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” The truth is, preaching is always challenging and it is oh so easy to get stuck, stymied, hung up on the wrong thing. But, isn’t that true of life, of the challenges of any profession, of any aspect of living one’s life from day to day? We struggle with questions and doubts about how to handle the task, whatever it is, even as we struggle with being pulled in other directions at the same time. I wanted to write my sermon, but I also wanted to sit in the sun with a cup of tea and a good book. I wanted to write my sermon but I also envisioned an afternoon spent checking out new marble countertops for our kitchen. Without even realizing it, I got myself all hung up on other things which distracted me, kept from engaging in the one task that really mattered in the moment – writing this sermon.

So, what does all this have to do with the story from Matthew about Jesus and what he had to say about what we know as the “Great Commandment” or the Golden Rule? To answer that question, we need to pay attention to the context of the situation Jesus finds himself in as described by Matthew. Just before this particular story, Matthew describes two previous encounters

Jesus had with the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a sect within Judaism at that time which had a very strict and narrow understanding of the Torah and its application to daily life and worship. They did not get along with the Pharisees, another group who had trouble with Jesus, because the Pharisees accepted insights from the oral traditions of Judaism as well as the Scriptures. They also didn't get along with any groups within Judaism who were political activists pushing back against the injustices of the Roman Empire. In essence, they were the fundamentalists of their time who wanted to placate the Roman authorities so they would be permitted to worship in the Temple the way they wanted.

Knowing this, it is very easy to see why the Sadducees had big problems with Jesus. Not only did he dare to rely on the oral traditions of Judaism, but he also layered on his own interpretations of sacred Scripture. He taught that worship done just for the purpose of meeting certain standards or maintaining certain rules wasn't really worship. It was empty ritual. And, while he didn't overtly criticize the Roman Empire, his advocacy for the poor and those treated unjustly would have made the Sadducees very, very anxious. At the point of today's story, it is actually the third run-in with the Sadducees he has had that day. Jesus knew that the Sadducees were hung up on him and his entire way of interpreting the scriptures and teaching people to

relate to God. They were hung up on the fact that he was upending all the rules, all the things they believed were crucial to being a faithful, devout person and replacing it with something they couldn't really understand or accept. So, they decided to trip him up, trick him into saying something that would discredit him to his followers. They had already asked him about paying taxes to Rome and about marriage laws and regulations. He saw the traps in their words and neatly side-stepped them.

Then they decided to ask him what they thought must be the one question he couldn't answer without revealing himself to be a false prophet. "Teacher," the lawyer asked him, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Now the lawyer knew there were Ten Commandments, and that traditionally all were considered equally important. He also knew that the entire book of Leviticus was filled with rules and regulations on every aspect of life for the devout, including everything from clothing to food to ritual bathing to worship. How could Jesus possibly pick just one thing and say it was more important than any other part of the law? He couldn't! And if he tried, they would have him. That was the Sadducees plan, but ... it didn't work.

Jesus didn't take a minute to think about an answer. He didn't need to. "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.” There isn’t one Commandment among the Ten that’s more important than the others, Jesus says. They’re all equally important and they are all included in loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus is right about this of course. Think about it. The first four commandments – No other gods but God; No graven images of God; No taking of God’s name in vain; Keeping God’s Sabbath holy – are descriptions of ways to love God. The fifth through the tenth commandments are all about our relationships with other people – Honor your parents; Do not murder; Do not commit adultery; Do not steal; Do not lie; Do not covet what belongs to someone else. All of these commandments, handed down to Moses on Mt. Sinai, come down to the two points Jesus makes: We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have, and we are to love other people as we love ourselves. That’s it. That’s all there is. Jesus leaves no doubt of this when he says: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Love God and love the other. Everything, *everything* in the Torah, everything in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible like Psalms and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, everything the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Elijah and Ezekiel spoke and wrote about can be summed up in these two commandments,

Jesus says. There is nothing else that matters to God, Jesus told the young lawyer. It all comes down to love and how much of it you have, how much of it you are willing to invest in something other than yourself. How much of yourself are you willing to invest in loving God, Jesus is asking. How much of yourself are you willing to invest in loving other people? How seriously do you take God's commandments to live a life each day grounded in and bounded by love? That and nothing else is the measure by which God will evaluate our lives.

But guess what? That is an impossible standard for any of us to meet. We all do unloving things that impact other people. We all fall short of loving God the way Jesus did. We all get hung up on investing our time and our lives in things that don't really matter in the long run. We focus on all sorts of things that seem really important – like our own physical health and wellbeing and our own financial security. Don't get me wrong! None of these are bad things to do in and of themselves. We need to pay attention to our health – eating the right things, getting enough rest and exercise – if we are going to have the strength and stamina to do what God needs us to do. And our own financial security is what enables us to support the ministry of this church and to assist those in need as we are able. The thing is, Jesus is saying, we can't get hung up on these other things to the exclusion of loving God and loving others because when we do we are relegating the

two key actions of our lived faith to second or even third class status in our lives. No, Jesus says. That will never do.

Where does that leave us then? At the beginning of Lent, of course. This is the time to reflect on what it is Jesus invites us to do as people of faith. We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love other people as we love ourselves. Truthfully, we don't do this consistently. None of us. And that, dear friends, is precisely the point of Lent. Now is the time to stop and ponder ways we might love God better and then try to do it. Now is the time to recognize how it is that we don't love others the way we should and engage in becoming more loving, more caring, more compassionate. As Lent reminds us, this will most likely mean giving something up. Most likely a little time, coming to worship more consistently, praying more frequently, reading the Bible more often. Then there's stepping outside of your comfort zone to show your love for God through how you care for others, through the mission and service opportunities here at church and out in the community and there are a LOT of them. The thing here is don't get hung up on what you can't do. Don't waste time and energy telling yourself why you can't do this or that. The truth is, no one can do everything. But everyone can do something. I'm pretty sure Jesus would say, focus on what you can do, and just do it. Amen.