

Matthew 22:34-40

What's love got to do with it?

October 29, 2017 The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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This morning my task is to encourage you to give joyfully and generously in response to God's generous love for you. Of course, I'm making an assumption right here at the beginning. My hopeful assumption is that you do indeed know God's love for you. Your experience of that God's love for you is the basis everything I have to say this morning about giving.

But, rest assured that I'm not going to ask you merely to support a religious institution. I'm not going to ask you to meet a budget goal, and threaten you with dire consequences if we fail to meet it. Nor am I going to twist your arm, or make you feel guilty; that's not my style. *The more important question is not what I'm asking, but what you believe **God** is asking of you as you consider your financial stewardship.*

I am, as your pastor, going to ask you on **God's** behalf, to give all you can cheerfully, in response to God's deep love for you. That's it: everything you give *is in response to God's love for you*. It all begins with your knowing God's love. So there you have it; I've given you the end of the sermon before I've even begun the closing argument.

One more thing at the beginning; today is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. It's good for us to remember that the Reformation began because Martin Luther's heart was profoundly moved by the experience of God's love in Jesus Christ. He was a deeply flawed man, as we all are, and he was so captured by the love of God, especially for the poor and oppressed, that at age 33, defying death threats, he confronted the powers-that-ruled an deeply flawed Church, with a faith and courage that few people possess. *We should never forget that it was God's love that moved him to act so courageously.*

So when Tina Turner sarcastically asked, *what's love got to do with it*, the Beatles joyfully answered, *Love is all you need*. Then Amy Winehouse mournfully sang, *Love hurts*. And she is right, of course. But Saint John said **God's** *love is when you sit all night with your neighbor who has just found her husband dead on the living room floor. And all she wants to do is scream into the darkness. And all you do is sit with her and maybe hold her hand. That's what you do because God's love lives in you through Christ.*

When a lawyer asked Jesus which of the 681 laws in Torah is the greatest commandment, he responded without hesitation, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind. The second step is to love your neighbor as yourself. Then as if to emphasize its importance, Jesus says, *everything hangs on love*. Everything.

*I find it wonderful and frankly astonishing that of the 681 laws in the Torah, Jesus zeroed in on this call from Leviticus to remind us that love is the heart of everything.* Our congregation - the one to whom you belong - is seeking to be a community of Jesus' followers that puts love for God, love for neighbor and love for our vulnerable selves at the very center of everything.

Do I believe our congregation – our life together in this sailboat church - is a **gift from God** to be celebrated in this shattered, violence-ridden world filled with conflict, fear, loneliness and anxiety?

In one single word, yes! I believe this is a gift from God and that is why it's a joy for my wife and me to give our money in gratitude to God. Is our congregation perfect? Heaven's no; we are a work in progress always. But this community is beacon of love, a community of Spirit and service, and sailboat open to the Spirit. I believe this and support it as generously as possible.

A church consultant once asked me:

•**Why does your church exist?**

I answered her in this way: Saint Mark exists as a spiritual community where the three great loves are deeply integrated in our life together: *love of God, love of neighbor and love of self. This is why we exist: to experience and share the love of God.*

This month we have asked ourselves a similar question:

•**if Saint Mark vanished, what different would it make in your life and in this community.**

Several of you responded by sharing your story of what this church has meant for your own spirituality and that of your family.

•One of you said, *"I do indeed feel God's love through my relationship with those who I've come to know through this church. Without Saint Mark in my life, I would be so much distanced from God's love and grace."*

•Another said, *"The impact of Saint Mark on my life extends beyond Sunday. My children learn about God by coming here. My family is able to connect with other families in small groups. We have found ways to serve the needy, too."*

•Striking a bold Stars Wars tone, one member said, *"The Spirit of the Lord is strong here. I renew a strong connection with the Living God."*

I decided to ask our neighbors with whom we partner in ministry and to whom we contribute nearly \$45,000 in financial support. I did this once before and decided to do it again. I can't share them all. Here is only a couple. The others on the atrium wall. Please read them.

Batya Glazier of the Jewish Community Relations Council said: *Saint Mark is a community committed to fellowship and deepening understanding, under the leadership of pastors dedicated to justice, compassion and finding the truth. The loss of Saint Mark would be profound. A Christian community that we can count on as a partner to increase knowledge and understanding, and offer support for the Jewish community, and all faith communities, is truly meaningful, and a moral anchor for a society that needs one.*

Christina Johnson of Rebuilding Together said: *For years, Saint Mark has been instrumental in inspiring their members with the principle that its community is tied by spirit and service. The community would lose an example of service beyond the church walls and a team of "brand ambassadors", "servant leaders" and accessible examples of Christ's unyielding and nonjudgmental love for all neighbors.*

Wilson Gunn, the Executive Presbyterian of National Capital Presbytery wrote:

*If Saint Mark were to disappear, among many other things,*

•*One hundred and fifty saints would not benefit from the means of grace provided in weekly worship*

•*several mentally challenged adults would not have a place to worship.*

•*The stranger, the foreigner and the refugee may not experience the radical hospitality of Saint Mark Church's welcome.*

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I've come to the close that I've already given away.

I know that this congregation and the ministry we do sharing God's love is valuable to you. I know it is! That's why I believe you will give generously in response to what God has given you here at Saint Mark. I'm trusting God that we will celebrate with joy!

Anne Frank once said beautifully: ***"No one has ever become poor by giving." I love that and when I posted it on Facebook someone replied, "No, we become richer by giving." Wow!***

This is your opportunity to give generously to God in gratitude for a community of faith that makes you come alive, that is seeking to love for God, neighbor and ourselves, and provides a spiritual home for you and your family.

Next Sunday is All Saints' Day when we remember those who have come before and consecrate our financial pledges. As I said in the beginning: I trust God, you will give as generously as possible and come prepared to celebrate the love of God for us in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.