Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV updated)

The Greatest Commandment

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37 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.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

We are one in the spirit we are one in the Lord.
We are one in the spirit we are one in the Lord.
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

I. A few years ago, I received a call that as a bishop I never wanted to receive. On the other end was a family member who had called to share with me that one of my District Superintendents had suffered a cerebral brain hemorrhage and was in critical condition at a local hospital.

When Sally and I entered the hospital that night we discovered that my friend was in major surgery. The outcome would determine whether or not he would live.

Here was a man who, just hours before, had faithfully preached the word of God. At 55 years of age, seemingly had life in an enviable position. He loved his work and was extremely fulfilled in living out his calling.

Yet, in a matter of hours, this jovial, gentle spirited soul was clinging to life – a reminder than all any of us has is just a moment.
The hours and days following his surgery revealed some sobering realities yet some renewed possibilities. I would sit in that hospital room and be completely overwhelmed and blessed by this man’s wife. Everything she had counted on and savored about life had been completely dismantled. All that she and her husband worked for had been reduced to some very basic truths. What do you do when all that you are and all that you dream to be & do together has reduced to such simplicities? What do you do when all that you have built as a life has crumbled with a brain hemorrhage?

Quite simply, you build on the foundation of Love.

This woman was a rock of faith, a hopeful optimist, and an undeniable believer in miracles. She loved her husband and, to this day, even though he is still limited in speech, confined in movement, and unable to care for himself, this woman, who has stood by him through it all, still tells him that she loves him every day. Even though some things have changed, there is still love that commits them to each another. Even though life is difficult, love is the foundation upon which she stands – she reads to him, tells him stories, reminds him of the early days of their love. Even though it does not feel like it’s even fair, when everything else crumbles, love is still at the core, the foundation of who they are.

I. One could easily say that the church we love has also suffered a cerebral hemorrhage as well and, as a result, we too have been standing on a crumbling foundation. Much of what we have been able to count on as normal and predictable has been turned upside down.

Organized religion is suffering these days. We are accused of being irrelevant, out of touch, and not able to meet the needs of a rapidly, constantly changing and ever skeptical world.

It reminds me of the verse in Charles Wesley’s famous hymn, “And Are We Yet Alive?” that says, What troubles have we seen, what conflicts have we passed? Fightings without and fears within since we assembled last.”

We have been searching desperately for ways to make our message relevant to the needs of the 21st century. We have struggled to get our hands dirty with the world, struggled to find a way out of churches and into our communities where the hungers and hurts of people dwell most. And probably more than anything else, we are fighting with one another.

The church of Jesus Christ has a great history. We are the source of great hope and joy. Yet, how many can hear us through the walls of our churches when all they hear are our grumblings and groanings? We are standing on a crumbling foundation. Instead of focusing on what is wrong with the church, it is time for us to focus on what is right. We need a Holy Spirit movement once again!
II. We should, though, in no way be too hard on ourselves. The church has always struggled to embody and imitate the very life of Jesus. Listen to the commission he gave us: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Sounds great but that’s a tall order.

This commission to make disciples was and is a formidable task. It was a tall order. Jesus only had a three-year public ministry. Three years of public ministry, confined to travels in Palestine.

Yet, he commanded those followers to travel to every corner on the face of the globe and proclaim the good news of the gospel. He charged the church and its followers to finish what he started. As Gerald Sittser says, “If Christ was the incarnation of God in the world, the church is to be the incarnation of Christ.”

We are to be, for the world, to the world, in the world, the very face of Christ. We show that face by the way we live and way in which we project our ministry in the world. In every action. With every step. In every situation.

III. These are huge shoes to fill. This is a mammoth peak to climb. This is an amazingly perplexing commission. Go into all the world and be like me? Tell them the story? Make them want to drop their nets, their agendas, their possessions, their priorities and follow? We’re having struggles staying together at the table? We’re holding on to old structures and systems and we’re not the movement we once were. Have you not noticed? We’ve had a hemorrhage of the spirit, Lord! Could it possibly be that we are not the chosen ones to go everywhere and make disciples?

Oh, we’ve said that in the quiet of the night. We’ve hung on to our security blankets of assurances because grasping at the unknown just isn’t prudent or wise. But the Lord hasn’t given us a new chapter in the Holy Bible for sometime now. There are not any retractions printed saying, “You know, I’ve been expecting too much of you in this disciple-making thing. I’ll lighten up. You just do what you are doing and I’ll be happy. Just give it the good old college try. Whatever you can do will be good enough.”

I’m still looking for it. Yet, it hasn’t come. The call is still clear – Go and make disciples. But how? How Lord, do we go about it? Show us the way.

IV. This is the very question the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus himself. They just couldn’t believe that Jesus could be the model of consistency that he had become. So, they make every conceivable attempt to trap him with his own words. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” In their plot to trap him the critics say, “Let’s thrust Jesus into the middle of a theological controversy. Everyone has her/his favorite verse, the GREATEST VERSE we think out to be quoted and followed by everyone!”
Without blinking an eye, Jesus quotes to them what they already know by heart: The beloved Shema of Deut 6:5 – the commandment to love God above everything else and joining it with Leviticus 19:18, the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

There was nothing original or controversial here. The Rabbis had long quoted these two verses together as a marvelous, concise summary of the whole law of Israel. No new information. No new spiritual enlightenment. Just a reminder of what has been all along. Something they have known since they were playing in the school yard during recess. Love the Lord your God with all you have and love your neighbor as yourself. Class is over. School is out.

V. Hey, that’s not fair, we cry! Hey Jesus, how to we make disciples? How do we grow the church? “Just love.” Come on, man! Give us something original. It can’t be that simple. We’ve heard that for years. And Jesus’ reply? Yep. You’re right. You have.

Just love.

Love your neighbor. It’s the best way to make a disciple and grow a movement of transformation once again.

VI. We’ve tried a lot of things over the years to make the church real and vital and life changing. We’ve tried our hand at political power, attended political rallies, build superior systems and structures, created sophisticated technology, raised up great preachers, held impressive crusades & other public rallies, built big buildings created hospitals and clinics, and coordinated sophisticated programs.

Yet, the church’s greatest success depends upon only one thing: mutual love created and shared within the community of faith and beyond into meaningful relationships throughout the world based on the foundation of love. The quality of our love for one another among Christians makes the church an effective witness for the gospel because it is what the human spirit longs for, dreams of and desired.

When we demonstrate our genuine desire for unity in Jesus Christ, God draws us into a perfect love that exists between us and God and between us and the world. God calls the church to become a community of mutual love in the world so that people will see and experience the love that believers have for one another but also the love that God has for us.

And that simple, very basic message may be exactly what we in this room need to hear. Can we unite around a love for God and a love for one another? Can we make that important enough, good enough to be compelling and head turning for those who do not expect us to get along?
The way of the world is not the answer. Love is. And the best example of it is Jesus himself. We need a revival of spirit and belief.

We have looked for a word from the Lord. But the message has always been the same. Love. Simply, intentionally, deeply, love.

It is the foundation of our belief in Social Holiness and the deep longing for those committed to Personal Holiness. There is no directive from Jesus to ever justify war, or anger, or division, or accusation, or violence in any form. But there IS a directive to love.

Why?

Because God first loved us. It is a simple directive but given the recent discord in the world and division within the church, it is a tall mountain to climb.

VII. I mean to cut to the chase, the reality about our work together is that we operate out of that which flows from our being, that which flows out of our hearts. The question is: What is our agenda and what is actually behind all that we talk about? The scripture lesson reminds us quite simply that what must flow out of our hearts is the whole concept of Loving God AND Loving our neighbor. It’s not any new. It’s not innovative or creative or the latest fad. It’s what Rabbis learned from Deuteronomy & Leviticus that Jesus reminded them of in Matthew that we remind one another of every time we gather: The key to transformation is to build on a foundation of Love.

I know that our disagreements are real, but I also know that our mission is greater than our disagreement.

It was thirty-seven years ago that I had the privilege of traveling to Africa for the first time with a team of short-term missionaries were visiting Liberia, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, & Zimbabwe. I was a young pastor. 28 years old with a very small world view.

While in Kenya, we traveled one day from Nairobi to Meru. Our purpose in going was to see the region and to help dedicate a new fellowship hall for a growing church. On the way, however, our bus broke down and we were stranded for several hours. There I was thousands of miles from home stranded on the side of a Kenyan highway. By the time the bus was repaired and we arrived in Meru, the dedication had ended. We heard about the wonderful celebration, about the people sitting on the ground outside the church, and how the sermon had to be shared mouth to ear, mouth to ear in order to reach the back row. A handful of people remained and took us through the building. Inside the fellowship hall there was a small group of people. They approached us and asked if they could sing to us. We agreed and they shared a nice song or two. Before we knew what had happened we turned around and there were several hundred people who had gathered in the fellowship hall behind us. The children had been sent out to run
the streets with the call, “The missionaries have arrived. The missionaries have arrived.” And in response, people who had been in church all day long, left the homes they had just recently entered, and returned to the church once more. They danced. We danced. They sang “Amazing Grace” in Swahili while we sang the very same words in English. The celebration continued into the evening. It was glorious.

It was on that night that I realized that we were different people from different lands with different customs who worshipped the same God. It was in that place, so very far from my native land, that I felt more at home than anywhere I have been. What makes it possible for people of different lands to sing the same song of faith, exhibit radical hospitality with strangers from afar, and do everything in their power to see that those strangers are cared for, fed, and embraced? There is only one answer: a commitment to mutual respect, and an awareness that we are building on the foundation of love.

VIII. This whole concept is as simple as three words that say more than any theological concept known to humanity: You are loved. It is as basic as John Wesley’s 3 Simple Rules: Do Good. Do no harm. Stay in love with God. The key realization though is that although it is unchanging and simple in scope, it is not manufactured by humanity or accomplished through church systems, structures, or ministries.

The source and center of this love is found in one person: Jesus himself. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Jesus turns sinners into saints, transforms enemies into friends and enables strangers to love one another. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus. There is no other basis for unity than God’s love for us in Christ Jesus, and our love for God through Christ in return. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christians can live with one another in peace, they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus are we one, only through him are we bound together in love.”

Political affiliation, musical preference, national identity, and religious background have no primary role to play in the church. Everything including our opinions and our preferences are of secondary importance.

What is of primary importance is Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer says, “The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.”
Jesus is the one who calls the church to be united in love, and his reminder of love as the center core of our being is what makes the church what God intended it to be from the beginning – a foretaste of heaven.

IX. SO, what do you do when the foundation of life crumbles around you? What do you do when you are tempted to lash out in anger or show a face that resembles the world more than the face of God? What will you do when a cerebral hemorrhage stops the flow of information between you and God and you do not know where to turn?

What will you do when everything around you has crumbled, when the ones you have depended upon the most have forsaken you, when you feel as if you are hanging alone and the whole world seems to be staring at you?

You make it when you remember what he said when he hung alone in front of the world, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” . . . and you love at all times, in all ways, in all places, . . . you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. And you love your neighbor as yourself.

Maybe it is summarized like this:

We are one in the spirit we are one in the Lord.
We are one in the spirit we are one in the Lord.
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other. We will work side by side.
We will work with each other. We will work side by side.
And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride.
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.
And together we’ll spread the news that God IS in our land.
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.