

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Mark 12:28-34

November 5, 2006  
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28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Like most of you, I like to be good at the things I do. If I'm not good at something, I don't do it. When I was a child my parents thought I would never learn to ride a bike because after trying once and falling, I wouldn't try again. But what they didn't know is that I was secretly practicing riding my bike in our basement where no one could see me fall. Then, when I knew I was ready and would appear "successful", I took the bike out on the road where I dazzled them with my athletic prowess. (Okay, so no one would ever use my name and the words "athletic prowess" in the same sentence, but at least I didn't fall down.) And because I strive for success, it is difficult for me to confess to you, that as a precinct delegate in Kasson Township, I have been a failure. I ran for this position because I thought it would be a good way for me to fulfill my civic duty, and I because there was no one else running for the position for my party, I was guaranteed not to fail. However, since the election I have been anything but successful as a precinct delegate. Now you might be wondering what it is exactly that a precinct delegate does and I reveal my ineptitude at the job by admitting to you that I'm not really sure myself. I make phone calls reminding people to vote and during the 2004 presidential election I sat at a little table in the Kasson Township Hall checking off the names of registered party members as they voted. But other than that, I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing. Fortunately my term will be over soon. I will not go down in the history books of Kasson Township as the most outstanding precinct delegate ever—but I did learn a lot while being a precinct delegate—admittedly not about the things I should have been learning about, but rather I've learned a lot about another precinct delegate.

As a precinct delegate, one of the things I had been coached on before the 2004 election was how to be a poll challenger. It was my job to assure that members of my party were given the opportunity to vote and to challenge anyone at the polls who attempted to stand in their way. Now this is a ridiculous assignment for me to take on because I abhor confrontation. And I'm grateful that I wasn't serving as a precinct delegate in some big city with rampant voting irregularities and injustices. I understand precinct delegates in those areas are sometimes threatened and often involved in heated arguments. But that's not really the ethos of election day in Kasson Township. It's much more laid back there. For one thing, every one knows almost everyone else and everybody usually knows who you're voting for—based on the signs in your yard—prior to the election so there aren't many surprises. And though I did arrive at the township hall ready to do battle with my counterpart from the other party should it become

necessary, I was relieved when that person's face was a familiar one. My counterpart, the person next to whom I should have been sitting in an uneasy tension on election day, was Pauline East. And so instead of the tense and stressful environment I had imagined, we sat and chatted for most of the time. At the time I was not yet your minister and Pauline didn't know I was a candidate for the job, but I had preached here a few times and so our faces were familiar to one another. And as we sat and talked, skirting any political issues of course, I grew to know her better and even, dare I admit it, like her even though, in political terms, she was supposed to be my arch enemy and I was to be keeping an eye on her and she on me.

And to be honest, that's what we've been doing ever since—keeping an eye on each other—not in the big brother is watching kind of a way that maybe we should have been doing at the Kasson Township hall that day, but rather in a neighborly kind of way. Pauline lives less than two miles from me which in Kasson Township means she's a close neighbor. And that she and Grayson are just down the road and around the corner gives me great peace of mind. I feel like, with them there, there is someone keeping eye on us—like a parent keeps a watchful, loving eye on a child. I know that if I needed them, all I would have to do is pick up the phone and they'd be there to help in a minute. And we, in return, keep an eye on them. When I take a walk and pass their house I pray for them and a couple of times I've even stopped by just to say hi.

BUT, if I didn't know them I'm quite certain I'd be sure I didn't like them based on the political signs in their front yard. If I didn't know the good, kind, and generous people living back in that grove of trees, I'd surely groan instead of pray every time I walk past their house. I'm guessing that as long as Pauline and Grayson and Corey and I are living in Kasson Township, we will continue canceling out each other's votes. But, there's something more important going on between the Easts and the Sandersons. There's something bigger than party affiliation or ballot issues. God is going on between the four of us and God trumps all of those other things.

Grayson, Pauline, Corey, and I all have in common that we're trying to live our lives by the greatest commandment Jesus gave—which is *to Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.* (Mark12:30) Now would it be easier to love them if they thought like we do, perhaps. But would I be telling you about our relationship if that was the case? No, because that would be boring and predictable. What is anything but boring and predictable is trying to have a loving relationship with folks who firmly believe in things that you don't, who are your foils in the voting booth, and whose yards signs make you angry.

And that, my friends, is one of the things I think makes this church so special. There are many, myself included, who would say we don't rank very high on the diversity scale. All of our faces are white, most of us are middle class, and most of us are US citizens with a decidedly Judeo-Christian view of the world. And yet, when we talk about the big, decisive issues of our time—abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research, the war in Iraq, solutions to poverty, Social Security—we're a very diverse group. I don't know of many churches that support the kind of political diversity we support. I also don't know of many churches that support the kind of theological diversity we do. Some of us believe that you have to be saved to go to Heaven, others believe it's already been taken care of. Some of us fear the fires of hell, others of us don't believe that there is a hell. Some of us believe that Jesus Christ is the divine son of God, others

of us think Jesus was a really good guy but aren't so sure about all of that divinity stuff. Some of us believe that the Bible is the Inerrant Truth, the Word of God, others of us believe that the Bible is a book of stories that reveal truth but isn't The Truth. Friends, I don't know if you know just how unusual this is! Perhaps it's this way in a big church where many of the people don't know each other well and so it's not a big deal to disagree with each other, but we're a small church and most of us know some of us or even most of us very well. And yet, we're still a church and more than that, we're a family. Many of you, when asked about the strengths of this church would say that we're friendly. And I would agree. But when colleagues ask me about the church I serve, the first thing I talk about is how stunned I am at how different we all are and yet we get along so well. And more than getting along, we love each other and show that love in the many ways we are present to each other—helping each other work on houses, making each other meals, giving each other rides, visiting with each other. It's really astounding the way this congregation cares for its own, no matter what signs we have in our front yards.

Now so far this sermon is sounding like a big ol' love letter. And that's fine and good and we all need love letters. But this love letter has a PS. Yes, we all need each other and we care about each other. But we do need to remember that there are others who need us too. Others who are different than us. Others who make us uncomfortable because we don't know them or know of them. Others who make us uneasy. Others who seem not to belong here and yet need this church family just as much as the rest of us do. These are the others who, though they may not be our neighbors, as in they don't live in *our* neighborhood, they are of God and when we follow that first and greatest commandment *to Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*, we do that not just by loving God and each other, but also by loving the other—the unknown, the unkempt, the unemployed, the uneducated, the un-whatever it is we're expecting and wanting them to be. Because no matter what political persuasion we are and no matter what side of the issues we are on we can all agree that the world is often unkind to those who are unlike those who have power and influence. And these are the very ones Jesus came to serve and save. Yes Jesus came for us, but he came for them too and the most concrete way for us to love Jesus is to love the people he loved. Because, let's face it, in the end, we are them—none of us really stack up or make the grade or never, ever fall off of our bicycles. We've all got those things in our lives that make us an “un”. We're unhealthy, unyoung, unpowerful, unemployed, uninspired, unable to remember, un-der a lot of pressure. None of us have earned the right to be here, rather all of us recognize our *need* to be here.

And the next step is to recognize that others need to be here, too. We've been good about giving to the other and caring for the other through our mission giving and work. But now it's time to invite the other, to welcome the other, and to love the other. Because, in the end, we *are* the other and the other is us because we are all of God and the command is for us to love *each and every* other.

So, I confess, I'm a lousy precinct delegate. But, I try to be a good neighbor and I want to follow Jesus' greatest commandment and so I thank God for the opportunity to get to know the other and to let the other get to know me and in that knowing, we both get know God a little bit better. Thanks be to God.