

“How May I Help You?”
Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21; Psalm 86: 8-10; Galatians 5:13-17; Mark 10:35-45
Salem United Methodist Church
July 6, 2014
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This is an important weekend in the life of our nation. On Friday we celebrated the 238th anniversary when thirteen British colonies declared their independence. It is also an important week in the United Methodist Church. On July 1 pastoral appointments begin or continue. In our conference nearly 120 pastors are preaching their first sermon at a new appointment. On July 1, I realized that I am beginning my seventeenth year in ministry and my seventh in ministry here at Salem. It took me nearly forty years to discern my call to the ministry, but when I did, I knew what I was finally supposed to be “when I grew up.”

These past sixteen years have been some of the best years and some of the most challenging ones in my life. They were the best in that I have shared joys and sorrows with so many wonderful people. I have witnessed people come to faith and grow in their faith. Since 2008, Salem has received forty-one new members. I have celebrated with many the joy of love, commitment, and every day faith living. While at Salem I have officiated at 8 weddings and taught five Disciple Bible Study classes as well as I am part of the Salem Prayer Partners, the Upper Room Discussion group, and the Adult Sunday School when my Sunday morning schedule permits. I have walked alongside those who were searching, those who were hurting, and those who were grieving. We have had 29 funerals at Salem since July 1, 2008. There has been a sharing of laughter, listening, crying, food, more food, more food, and endless cups of coffee. Being a pastor is a privilege. It is a privilege to be invited into the lives of so many as a spiritual director and a confidant. And I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. It is also a privilege to be invited again to continue our journey together as your pastor.

At the same time being a pastor has been one the most challenging ones of my life. A colleague of mine posted a cartoon on Facebook that more or less sums up the challenges of pastoral ministry in the 21st century, “Basically [the church wants] an innovative pastor with a fresh vision who will inspire our church to remain exactly the same.” Life doesn't stay the same. We are living in a time in which our world is not only changing every day, but we can know about these changes within seconds. One of these changes is that as Christians, we find ourselves living in a non-Christian culture that can be very unfriendly to us. More people don't trust the Church than there are those within the church. Their reasons are that the church does not represent kindness, mercy, and love. Why is this? Here's my take. First, we as Christians are not perfect people. We don't all agree on everything or sometimes anything. There can be infighting. Some win. Others lose. The losers either stay in the church to retaliate sometimes in very mean ways. Some drop out of church completely. Others leave the church bad mouthing it by spreading the bad news of the church. Still others find another church to their liking until they disagree with something in that church. Some will even start their own church based on their beliefs. Second reason people don't trust the church is that we are viewed as a closed group who love one another, but judge everyone else outside. We are viewed as exclusive. We are viewed as accepting others only if they believe as we believe. Basically, those who have been hurt by the church or never been in a church view us as being anything but Christ-like. Innovative pastors see these attitude changes. Many laity see them, too. Both want to make changes that will connect with those who are hurting, seeking, and lonely. Yet, change tends to come slowly in the church. Sometimes it takes one step forward and two steps backward for change to happen. We are creatures who feel more comfortable when we know what to expect, but change does happen. How do we as a church adapt to the changes in our world? Or how does the church create the change in the world?

With one four letter action word-LOVE. The human need and capacity for love never changes. Every person needs love. The world needs love. Humanity is created out of love by God so we can love. In Deuteronomy we see God calling us to love God and serve God our whole being, with our lives. Love originates in God. God's love for us and our love for God is primary to every human relationship. Our love for God can only grow when we strive to build this God-human relationship. How do we build this God-human relationship in your life? This is an important role of the church. We teach how to pray, how to study God's word, and how to worship God in a group setting as well as throughout our day. We know what happens when we don't stay connected with God, don't we? We become more focused on ourselves, our needs and the h-e-double toothpicks to everyone else. Soon we find ourselves ignoring others, tearing others down, wanting to

keep what we have for ourselves and doing everything we can to gain more. We become the greatest, the most important.

This is not the life God or Jesus calls us to live. Out of our love for God comes our love for others. We are called to love others, that is we are to show love by doing—doing what is just by caring for those in need. During the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, who did God see were the most vulnerable and in need? Children who didn't have parents, women who lost their husbands, and immigrants. God was not making a political statement here. God saw who needed the care and the love in the community and commands that we must love these by giving what we have to them. The Hebrew word, *ahava*, means to love and to give. We love not by saying the word, but by showing love, by giving what we have with another, by sacrificing what we have for another. Caring for others, giving to others, loving others is not a political agenda. It is God's agenda. This is real love. Jesus says this is real greatness, too.

We are not great when we strive to become the most affluent, the most powerful, but when we serve. In the hospitality industry, serving clients or customers comes before anything else. Customer service begins with these words, "How can I help you?" Those words tell us that someone cares about us. Someone wants to help us with whatever issue or need we might have. I ask a person who has made his career in the hospitality trade, what is good service. His response was: "To treat others as I would want to be treated." I immediately thought of Jesus' words, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). In the hospitality trade serving others is good for business. During the Greco-Roman culture that Jesus lived in, serving others was a similar, yet different from our time. Servants were menial laborers, doing the hard, dirty, unthankful jobs, often unpaid. I think of those who cook and serve our food in restaurants or clean our hotel rooms. In Jesus' time servants were usually not free people. They were slaves. A servant is told what to do and is expected to do it. Sometimes a servant was a messenger, a go-between or personal attendant who delivers orders and carries out the desires and command of a superior. Being a servant was a socially undignified position because one was born to rule, not to serve. Yet Jesus takes this low position and elevates it. To serve another, he said, is to become great. We are called to do the dirty, unthankful jobs, to be a messenger, a go-between, to carry out the commands of our superior, in this instance, God. When we say Jesus is Lord, we are saying that Jesus is our Master. Serving others, giving to others, and loving others are about serving our Master, Jesus. John Wesley stated it this way in his sermon, "Who is Man?" that we are to know, love, enjoy, and serve our great Creator. This is our mission as Christians: to love God and others.

Jesus saw his mission as one in which he served humanity by giving his life to liberate us from all that separates us from God. Paul in his letter to the churches in Galatia echoes this. Through Christ we have this freedom, "only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love." He goes on to say that we are to "be guided by the Spirit so that we won't carry out our selfish desires. The Spirit is set against selfish desires." So we are not to do whatever we want to do. We are to be kind, merciful, and loving. We need to be reminded again and again, even daily. It is so easy to forget, to get caught up with everything else around us. We need to be reminded that God loves us and we are to love God. We are to love others. Jesus serves us with his life. We serve Jesus by serving others with our lives. This message of love is the whole ebb and flow of our communion liturgy. Jesus gave himself for us. We confess and receive forgiveness. God's grace is offered to us yet again through a piece of broken bread and juice. Jesus serves us with his body and blood. Then we are called to go into the world filled with God's grace to be Christ's body, pouring ourselves out as we love and serve others.

In my freshman year of college, I chose this verse which has become my theme verse in life and as a pastor. "Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love" (I Corinthians 13:13). I have witnessed this love for God and others over and over again here at Salem. We are a people committed to grow in our love for God in faith and express God's love to all as we serve unselfishly through our actions as well as use words to share our faith.

Reflection Questions: Who do you know that doesn't trust the church? How can you show them Christ through acts of love, mercy, and kindness? Who do you know who has drifted away from the church? How can you let them know that you miss seeing them and offer them encouragement? To whom can you offer these words, "How can I help you?"

Resources: *Many Servants* by Ormonde Plater; "Who is Man?" by sermon by John Wesley

