

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

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Dwelling and Indwelling

Text: I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Title: The Pillar of Mission and Outreach

The symbolic building of our church and our faith is coming together. We have the foundation – Jesus as our cornerstone – the one upon whom everything else is built and around which everything else is oriented. We have a supporting pillar of worship and praise – reminding us at all times to worship God, to focus on those things that God has done and in which we rejoice and give thanks. Last week the pillar of witness and spiritual formation was added as members of our congregation shared how we can help others know about God’s love and how they have grown in their faith. Next week, we will give thanks for those who have nurtured us in our faith; those who have completed their walk here on earth and now rest from their labors in God’s loving arms. On November 12th, we will bring all this together as we add a roof and make our dwelling a place where we can live and choose who we will serve in our daily life and how we will make that witness known as we provide the resources that our congregation needs to be in this important ministry.

Today, we add the third pillar – the pillar of mission and outreach. This pillar gets us outside of ourselves and outside of our walls. It encourages us to be in the world as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

About a dozen years ago a second-grade girl came to me and asked me if she could speak to the congregation and ask them to sign a petition to help save the monarch butterfly. I was impressed that this little girl who was very shy had such passion and wanted to speak to the whole

congregation. I asked her what she had learned in church that helped her believe that the people in church should care about the monarch butterfly. She responded that the Bible says that God made heaven and earth and all the animals and that we are supposed to take care of the animals and that includes the monarch butterfly.

That Sunday she stood before the congregation and explained to them exactly why she cared and why they should care. At a very young age, she had learned that our faith is supposed to make a difference in how we live our lives and that it should influence what we care about and where we put our energy.

While I was serving in Maine and leading 60+ church conferences every year, I started to wonder about how well people made a connection between their faith and the things that they did as a church. One year, I asked people, "If someone came into your food pantry, your thrift shop, or whatever the primary mission of the church was, and asked you why you do this, what would you say?" More often than not, my question was met with awkward silence until some brave soul would offer a hesitant response. In one church, someone responded quickly and confidently, "That's what Americans do." I confess that I was left speechless for a second or two, and then responded, "We might also say, that's what Christians do."

Many of us are uncomfortable talking about our faith but when someone asks a question like that, they are giving us an opportunity to briefly share something important about our faith. However, the key is that, we need to first know the connection between our faith and why we are doing these things otherwise we miss a valuable opportunity to witness.

Today's Scriptures give us that connection. Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica is his first letter and the oldest document in the New Testament. It is older than any of the Four Gospels, and it is written to a community with whom Paul spent very little time – probably no more than a few weeks. Yet, in this letter he professes that he loves them greatly and cares for them deeply. He reminds them that because of this love, he was like a nurse caring for her own children and wanted them to know about the gospel of God and God's love for them.

People selling something or promoting a project are taught to have an elevator speech. They should be able to outline an idea for a product, service or project in the time period of an elevator ride – usually 20-60 seconds. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us that elevator speech. A Lawyer asked Jesus which commandment in the law was the greatest. The Old Testament has 613 laws or commandments. I would imagine that the Lawyer was anticipating a complicated response, but Jesus, instead, gave an elevator speech. "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."

In only a few words, Jesus exposed the very core of what it means to live as a person of faith. This wasn't original to Jesus; he wasn't making up an answer; but he was establishing a clear priority. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 – a section called the Shema which begins "Hear, O Israel". This prayer is still the centerpiece for morning and evening Jewish worship. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

The key here is very simple, if we want our children to follow God, we must make God a part of our everyday experiences. We must teach our children diligently to see God in all aspects of life, not just those that are church related.¹

Jesus might have left it there, but he didn't. Loving God is the first commandment and it should be at the very center of our everyday life. But loving God means responding to that Love and putting that love into action and so Jesus also quoted from Leviticus 19:18. That is the summary of various other laws that tell us how to treat other people. The verses before this instruct the harvester not to reap to the very edges of his field but to leave anything that falls for the poor and the alien so that they may be able to gather food and not be hungry. They give a whole list of things we are not to do including not to lie, defraud our neighbor, hold back on wages, pervert justice, show favoritism to the great or to do anything that endangers your neighbor's life and so forth. Then verse 18 sums it up: love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus tells us that all the law and the prophets hang upon these two commandments. We don't need to be legal experts. We don't need to know all 613 commandments in the Old Testament. If we know these two, they provide us with the core of what we need to know to live a life that

¹ Life Application Bible, NIV version, note on Deuteronomy 6:7

stays in line with Jesus as the cornerstone of our foundation. Jesus takes us beyond a long list of “do’s and don’ts” into a living relationship with the God who is at the heart of the law. The aim of the Shema – to love God with all your heart and soul and strength – is to orient one’s entire life toward God.

However, equally important is to realize that we cannot truly love God without loving what God loves. To love God is to love in the way that God loves – indiscriminately. To love God is to love what God loves – everything. We cannot love God and oppose or exclude any of God’s creatures – even our enemies.

So, if we really love God then that naturally leads to love for neighbor and this is not just a vague feeling, but it is shown in concrete actions. In the church we call many of those actions missions or outreach.

When we dig down to the bottom of our motives, this is what we should find as the reason we do the many things we do as a church. The woman who answered me at a church conference by telling me that this was what Americans do, may have been right – although increasingly that seems not to be the case. However, I think she wasn’t going deep enough to ask why that was a value that she thought Americans held. This is why churches donate food to a food pantry – so that our neighbor will not be hungry – it is part of loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

As part of the United Methodist Church, we participate in something called connectional giving. Our mission shares help us do together what no one church can do on its own. In your bulletins every week there is an envelope that is an opportunity to make a special donation toward this work of mission and ministry. Since January you have contributed \$6923.25 toward our participation. In September the Finance Committee decided

that in addition to these envelopes we would commit to tithing our Sunday morning offering toward our share of these missions. We believe that if we honor God with this tithe, God will also bless us and our ministry. Since September 17th we have sent an additional \$1,362.70 toward our mission shares – ways of showing our love for God and neighbor. Through our mission shares we are involved in a long list of Christian missions and ministries in New England, the United States and throughout the world.

A couple of brief examples include a church that is building tiny huts for the homeless, a graduate of Africa University who is spearheading the adoption of Chaya, or Tree Spinach – a nutritious and drought resistant shrub from South America – and introducing this to women in Africa who struggle to feed their families, a church in St. Petersburg that visits laundromats and pays for homeless and low-income residents to wash their clothes. Our mission shares provide community outreach, social justice ministries and work with at-risk youth to mention just a few.

UMCOR – the United Methodist Committee on Relief is the arm of our denomination that responds to natural disasters at home and around the world. They work with communities around the world in disaster risk reduction programs and are on the ground with services and supplies following hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other disasters. Mission teams from Annual Conferences – including teams from New England work to help rebuild houses, provide clean water, and many other needs and are there for the long term. Years after the disaster has happened and most people who are not living with the results have forgotten about it and moved on to something else UMCOR teams are still present.

Following the recent hurricanes in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands – churches from New England sent almost \$97,000 for relief and almost \$66,000 worth of relief supply kits and buckets to Mission Central in Pennsylvania by John Blackadar a retired pastor who makes it part of his ministry transport collections to Pennsylvania for distribution to places of greatest need. We were part of that. Our church collected and sent in \$978. By the way, at any time, we can make additional donations to UMCOR for disaster relief knowing that 100% of what we donate goes to relief because the administrative costs are covered by one of the special offerings we receive during the year.

A special ministry of this church is our response to Golden Cross which provides assistance to residents at the United Methodist Elder Care in East Providence. Through the years, we have had many people from this church living either in the independent housing, assisted living, or nursing home sections of this important ministry – and we have several people from this church who put their love of God and love of neighbor into action by serving on the Board of Directors. This year, our congregation collected and sent \$1028 to show our love for God and our love for our neighbors.

I wish I knew the many ways that the people of this congregation put this love into action. I know that there are people who work at the food pantry, at a local clinic, who teach Sunday School, and lead youth group. There are those who work on fundraisers like today's Italian dinner so that we have more resources to reach out to our neighbors. Others volunteer in different organizations as one way of loving God and loving neighbor. In July, Sunniwaye and others prepared a dinner that helped to raise money for clean water in Liberia.

In a minute, Donawea is going to share with us a little bit about the way we love God and neighbor through the work we do to help schools in Liberia.

I invite us to think about the ways that this pillar of missions and outreach is an important part of our life as a congregation and as individuals and to be open to other places and ways where God may be calling us to act on our love for God and our love for neighbor. This pillar along with the pillars of worship, witness, and nurture – and along with the foundation of Jesus as our cornerstone build a strong house of faith so that God's work may be done, and God's love manifested every place we find ourselves.