

October 29, 2023 “One Voice”

Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson

Combined Service: First Christian Church & First Congregational Church

Psalms 90:1-6, Matthew 22:34-46

Will you pray with me? Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Well it's been a week! A month! A year!

In Gaza, our siblings are running out of food, water and power, and it is clear that the war between Israel and Hamas is taking its toll primarily on children, women, the elderly, innocents.

Another mass shooting -- 18 people killed and 13 injured in Lewiston, Maine.

Our legislators are in deadlock. Again. Caught up in partisanship that keeps them from legislating.

We are leaving our immunocompromised siblings behind as we abandon COVID safety protocols.

Hurricane Otis has left over two dozen people dead in Acapulco, Mexico. And scientists seek to understand why hurricanes are getting stronger and stronger.

War continues between Russia and Ukraine -- old news.

It is dizzying.

I don't know about you, but in the midst of all of this, I struggle with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness -- like no matter what I do the world just spins more and more out of control with greater and greater tragedies edging closer and closer to **our** doorsteps.

I feel powerless. To protect myself, my neighbors, my kids, our congregations and communities from personal or collective trauma.

Powerless to bridge political chasms that continue to divide us.

Powerless to change the realities of white body supremacy, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, ageism and classism in our nation and institutions.

The powerlessness feels particularly overwhelming right now because most of the time, we live pretty comfortably in the illusion of control. Holding onto the idea that we can somehow fix the world's ills or at least hold tragedy at bay.

The thing is: BOTH the illusion of control AND our feelings of powerlessness prevent us from claiming the power we actually have.

“What is the greatest commandment?” A lawyer asks Jesus, hoping, hoping to trip up this rabble rousing rabbi.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This commandment from Deuteronomy chapter 5 was central to Jewish teaching long before Jesus. It’s part of the *Shema*, the prayer that begins every Jewish worship: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*

But Jesus is not done yet. “There is another like it,” he says: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This instruction, from Leviticus chapter 19, has also long been integral to Jewish teaching and practice. “On these two commandments all the law and all the prophets depend.” [PAUSE]

It’s not *what* you believe.

Not *where* you worship or *how*.

Not how well you maintain purity laws.

Not how high or low your christology -- not your christology at all, in fact.

Not how often you go to church or read scripture or get on your knees to pray.

The **most** important thing, Jesus tells the lawyer, is loving God with all that you are, loving your neighbor, loving yourself. THIS is where our power lives.

In her article “The Greatest Commandments,” Rev. Debie Thomas poses and answers the obvious questions: “*But what does this mean? **How** are we to love?*”¹

“... Shaped as we are by Hollywood, romance novels, contemporary praise and worship music, [Hallmark cards, and tabloid magazines, we tend to think of love as a feeling. A spontaneous, free-flowing feeling that arises out of our own enjoyment, our own sense of kinship and affinity. We don’t think of it as [a] discipline, [a] practice, [an] exercise, [an] effort. We fall in love.... We talk and think about love as if we have little power or agency in its presence.

*“But [that’s] not how the Bible describes love. Jesus doesn’t say, “[May love find] you.” He says, “Love is the greatest and first commandment.” Meaning, it’s **not** [actually] a matter of personal affinity, feeling, or preference. It’s not a... lucky accident. It’s a matter of **obedience** to the one we call ‘Lord.’”²*

Love is hard. “Biblical love is vulnerable-making, and [most of the time, most of us would] rather not be vulnerable. [I’ll speak for myself: I’d rather be in control]. [PAUSE] Love requires trust. I’m naturally suspicious. Love spills over margins and boundaries... I feel safer and holier policing my borders. Love takes time, effort, discipline, and transformation, and I am just so... busy. [And exhausted.]

In her reflections, Rev. Thomas asks another question: “*What would it cost us to take Jesus’s version of love seriously? To practice and cultivate a depth of compassion that [hits us in the gut]? To train ourselves into a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that we rearrange our lives in order to pursue it? To pray for the kind of empathy that causes our hearts to break? [PAUSE] Do we even want to?*

¹ Debie Thomas, “The Greatest Commandments.” Posted October 18, 2020.

² *ibid.*

“Most of the time... I don’t. [I’d rather feel] safe [and comfortable]. [I’d rather] choose the people I love based on my own affinities and preferences — not on Jesus’s all-inclusive commandments. Charitable actions are easy. But... becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world’s pain? [That’s] hard. Hard and costly.”³

“And yet this is the call. [To claim the power of love which is our birthright.] [After all] we have a God who first and foremost wants our love — not our fear, [not our] penitence, [not our] piety [or our perfection]. We have a God who wants every one of God’s children to also feel loved. By us. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. But loved. [Empowered]

“[It’s not] a coincidence... that Jesus inextricably links love of God with love of neighbor [and self].... We cannot love God in a disinfected, disembodied way that doesn’t touch the dirt and depth of this world. Our love is meant to be robust..., hands-on and intimate. Reaching into skin and bone and blood and tears.

“Neither can we love ourselves or our neighbors in any meaningful, sustainable way if that love is not sourced and replenished in an abiding love for God. Only God’s love is inexhaustible; if we cut ourselves off from the flow of God’s compassion, we will quickly run dry [-- some of us know this from experience]. In other words, the motion of our hearts must be cyclical — love of God making possible and deepening our love of neighbor [and self], and love of neighbor [and self] putting flesh and bones on our love for God.”⁴

Here at this table, we step into the power of our vulnerability, the power of love. We proclaim God’s love for us, love that put on flesh and bones to walk with us. Here at this table, we are sourced and replenished in love. And so, God’s beloved, let us prepare to come. Let us surrender all that we cannot control and let us reclaim the power that we DO have -- the power to to love. Come, for **you are a beloved child of God**. And you were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within you [-- the power of God’s love within you]. Yes, yours is only one voice, but together, OUR one voice is a voice of power and a voice of love for all the world to hear. Let us pray.

Benediction from *A Black Rock Prayer Book*.

The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful
for anything but love.

May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.

Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.

May your hands be so blessed
that everything you touch is a sacrament.

Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.

May your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you.

And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire,
that your love, *your* love, changes everything.

And may the blessing of the God who created you, loves you,
and sustains you, be with you now and always.

May it be so.

³ Debie Thomas, “The Greatest Commandments.” Posted October 18, 2020.

⁴ Debie Thomas, “The Greatest Commandments.” Posted October 18, 2020.