



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 20, 2008 For What Purpose? (All You Need Is Love - Part III)
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

Deuteronomy 30:1-3, 6, 11-14

¹When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, ²and return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, ³then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. . . .⁶ Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. . . .¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, 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."

Did you feel it? The moment you crossed the threshold into this meeting house this morning, God blessed you. God blessed you on the day you first stepped foot into this meeting house, and he blessed you on the day you joined the covenant of this

congregation. In fact, every single time you return to this meeting house, God blesses you all over again with blessings of legacy, heritage, and tradition.

You didn't have to buy into a partnership agreement, post a country club bond, or purchase a single share of our divine joint venture. No turnstile, no ticket takers, no credential checkers – you just walked right in, took your place in the venture, and you were blessed, blessed with a legacy gift called the Congregational Church of New Canaan.

What's in this legacy gift? Well, just about every single nail, beam, labor, idea, and sacrifice necessary to build the congregational life we cherish together. *Somebody* had to endure the hazards of crossing stormy seas to establish churches in Stamford and Norwalk, but it wasn't you. *Somebody* had to press north from Stamford and Norwalk to settle the wilderness of the "new" Canaan, but wasn't me. *Somebody* had to bear a 4% tax on all their worldly goods to pay for our meeting house, but it wasn't any of us.

Someone had to organize the covenant, establish the Sunday School, launch mission works, build a choir, install an organ, buy the parsonages, begin a youth group, initiate adult education and then keep it all going generation after generation for 200 years before even the first of us started showing up to pick up our free legacy gifts.

Now, I know, some of you have generously served this church for 20, 40, 60 and even 75 years – and almost all of us have contributed in some way to the maintenance and improvement of our collective legacy. My point is simply this: most of what we have here together was handed to us, to all of us, as a free gift. We are, all of us, standing on the shoulders of giants, in fact, 12 generations of giants, who labored and sacrificed in their times, so that we could pick up our legacy gifts as we entered this morning.

Now there are many, many ways to respond to our collective good fortune. For instance, we might just break out in cheers of delight and start clapping each other on the back like so many siblings who discovered the family had won the Power Ball lottery; or we might give some serious thought to just dropping to our knees in awe and thanking God and our ancestors for our priceless blessing; or I might even shift gears in this sermon and start building up to an endowment appeal. All of these would be appropriate responses, but I have something different in mind for this morning.

This morning I want to ask: Why? For what purpose? For what purpose has God blessed you and me with the invaluable legacy of this great church? You see, God's blessings are always generative; they're always part of God's great project to transform humanity and all creation. When God blessed Abraham, God said, "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3).

So why, for what purpose, has God blessed us with the legacy of this church? If God has blessed us to be a blessing, well, then what is that blessing supposed to look like?

When we ask these questions, when we ask the "Why?" and "For what purpose?" questions, we're asking questions of vocation, vision, and mission. What is our congregation's vocation? What is our congregation's vision? What is our congregation's mission?

We're all pretty familiar with such questions. We're accustomed to addressing them at noteworthy intervals in our other engagements in life. So it won't come as any surprise to you that Roger Bolton and your other lay leaders have agreed to use the celebration of our 275th Anniversary as an opportunity to ask after our congregational vision together.

And just because we are so familiar with vision casting exercises, some familiar questions and approaches come easily to mind: How are we doing in our various undertakings? How could we improve our communications, our worship, our management, our stewardship, our facilities, our programs? These are

good and important questions, and I'm sure we will be discussing them.

But if these were the only questions we asked, or if we only asked them the way we ask them in our secular undertakings, I'm concerned we would miss the most important opportunity of our 275th Anniversary, the most important question of any congregational vision casting exercise. Let me illustrate my concern by telling a story; let's call our story "The Great Cycle."

Once upon a time, while God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit were sitting around, they decided to play a game of hide and seek with humanity. They wanted to teach us how to seek for them, how to find them. They were trying to decide where they would hide, when the Holy Spirit said, "Let us hide in the human heart. It is the very last place they will think to look!" So they hid in the human heart and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. For the Holy Spirit had been right, we didn't even think to look there.

So God came up with a plan. God said, "You know, we are going to have to give our humans some help. I am going to take this fellow Moses aside and use him to drop some pretty clear hints so everyone will be able to find us." And Moses went to his people with God's clues, really pretty close to a treasure map for how to find their way to the God hiding in their hearts. Moses gave them the great commandment that they should love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind, and he taught them they must also love their neighbors as themselves.

You might call the Great Commandment God's ultimate mission statement for humanity; and just in case humanity forgot that mission statement, God planted a copy in every human heart. As Moses said to his people, "*Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe*" (Deut. 30:11-14).

And so Israel loved God and neighbor with all their hearts, and as they loved so they found God hiding in their hearts, right where Moses said they would. They

were so excited that they all said, “This commandment is so simple. All we need to do is love. Let us write this commandment down so that we never forget where to find God.” And, “Let us write down all the ethical rules for behavior that help us live out that commandment.” And, “Let us take all our writings and collect them in one big scroll,” and “let us take our big scroll and preserve it in a great Temple where we can study it every week.” And, “Let us develop celebrations and rituals to remind us of the day God gave us our mission.” And, “Let us train up priests to teach us our writings and lead the rituals.” And, “Let us collect tithes to maintain the writings and the buildings and the priests.” In short, they said, “Let us develop a religion so we never forget where to find our God.”

Well, the people of Israel were justifiably proud of their religion: a majestic Scripture, a highly evolved ethic, a magnificent temple, enduring rituals, learned priests, and effective stewardship. But you know what happened. For many of them, more and more of their attention and energy went into developing and burnishing their great religion and less and less went into the love of God and neighbor that their religion was intended to preserve.

But God would not give up on his project, so God said, “You know, I’m just going to have to go down there myself as Jesus to get humanity back on track.” So Jesus gathered a small group of disciples, and he told them, “Look, our religion is a thing of wonder and beauty, but our core mission is actually quite simple. We are to love the Lord our God, with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and our neighbors as ourselves. Our Scripture, our ethics, our buildings, our rituals, our priests and our tithes, they are all just means to that mission, for it is in loving God and neighbor that we will find our God hiding in our hearts.

And so the early Christians loved God and neighbor with all their hearts, and, as they loved so they found God hiding in their hearts, right where Jesus said they would. They were so excited that they all said, “Jesus’ teaching is so simple, all we need to do is love.” But you know what happened next, they too sought to preserve their love of God and neighbor with a new Scripture, ethics, rituals, cathedrals, priests, and tithes. And, for many of them, more and more of their

attention and energy went into developing and burnishing their great religion and less and less went into the love of God and neighbor that their religion was intended to preserve.

But God still would not give up on his project, so he sent his Holy Spirit into the great reformers, into Martin Luther and John Calvin, and our Puritan forebears. And the message they carried to their people was, “Look, our religion is a thing of wonder and beauty, but our core mission is actually quite simple. We are to love the Lord our God, with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and our neighbors as ourselves. Our Scripture, our ethics, our buildings, our priests and our tithes, they are all just means to that mission, for it is in loving God and neighbor that we will find our God hiding in our hearts.” And so the great cycle began again. And again. And again.

So there’s my little story. What does it have to do with our vision casting? Well, I offer the story first as an answer to our opening question: Why? For what purpose has God blessed us with the priceless legacy of this church? It’s so the blessings of our legacy would help us learn to love our God and neighbor better.

And, second, I offer the story as a guide to our vision casting exercises. Let us certainly ask the important questions of how we might improve our communications, worship, management, stewardship, facilities, and programs. But let us not forget that all of these functions, as critically important as they are, are still only means to our larger mission, to love God and neighbor.

And let us ask also questions after that. Hard questions. Hard to frame and hard to quantify, but the most important questions of all.

When we ask “How are we doing?” as a congregation, let us ask in terms not just of numbers and programs, but let us also ask in terms of our great mission to love. These are harder questions to frame, but our tradition gives us some help. For instance, Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote, “The work of Jesus was not a new set of ideals or principals for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love.”¹ So, how are we doing by that standard? How are we doing at being a

community of forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love”?

Or, to take a second example, Henri Nouwen wrote, “Certain parishes, prayer groups, households, homes, convents and monasteries have a true healing influence that can make both their members and their guests feel understood, accepted, cared for, and loved.”² So how are we doing by that standard? How are we doing at making both members and guests feel understood, accepted, cared for, and loved?

And, finally, when we ask, “How are we doing?” Let us ask it of ourselves as individuals not just as a collectivity. Let us ask how are *you* doing, and how am *I* doing? Has your love of God and neighbor grown over the last four years? What has grown your love? What has frustrated, distracted, or limited your love? How could our efforts as congregation – our spiritual experiences, our Christian formation, our service to the world – how could these efforts help you and me grow to love even more deeply, even more consistently, even more enduringly?

My friends, if we celebrate our 275th anniversary by asking *these* questions prayerfully, lovingly, earnestly – then we will be triply blessed. We will be blessed because we will fully take hold of the blessings our God and our ancestors intended for us. And we will be blessed as those blessings, that love, flow through us and into our families and our world. And we will be blessed as those blessings flow through us and back into our beloved church and so down through the generations. So that some preacher may take this pulpit on April 20, 2,283, his face alive with gratitude, and ask his congregation, “Did you feel it? Did you feel the blessing as you crossed the threshold this morning?” **Amen.**

1 This thought recurs throughout Hauerwas’s work. See *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

2 Henri J.M. Nouwen, Donald McNeill, Douglas Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image, 1983), p. 55.