

‘God and Neighbor’  
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based on 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 and Matthew 22:34-40

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

I wonder how many Jews upon hearing Jesus’ condensed version of the 10 commandments went “Yahoo! Only two commandments, not ten! Two! I can do that!”

It’s not until you begin to try and live out those two commandments you get a sense of the personal commitment inherent in Jesus’ summary. Simply reducing the commandments from 10 to 2 doesn’t make obeying them any easier.

Please pray with me:

Welcoming God, gather us into your space with our whole heart, soul, and mind. Reveal to us a hint of the mystery that surrounds a love so complete, patience so vast, and eternal peace so full of hope we have no alternative than to return that love to you and share it with others. Prepare us now in heart, soul and mind. Amen.

Tuesday is Halloween. All Hallowed Eve.

Halloween began as a pagan festival to celebrate the time of year when people believed the veil between life and death was at its thinnest. Ancient belief thought the veil was so thin on that one night those who had died could pass through the veil from death to life to visit, or “haunt” family and friends.

Sounds spooky, right? ... but not so for those who first celebrated the pagan festival of Halloween. It was actually a time of celebration and remembrance when those who had died could come back and spend a brief amount of time with their loved ones.

It has only been in modern times that Halloween has taken on a far more scary and morbid understanding. While Halloween’s roots are as a pagan festival with no consideration of God or Jesus ... we are able to participate in this holiday because we are first guided by the commandments that focus our celebration on not what is blood and guts, but what is wine and bread.

Jesus guides us in those two commandments ... even on Halloween.

Did you know this year it is anticipated that we as a culture will spend nearly 7.4 BILLION dollars on decorations, costumes, candy, and Halloween paraphernalia!

For those of you who know I’m not good at math double-check me, but ... a tithe, or 10% of 7.4 billion is 740,000,000!

It sounds crazy, right? Halloween is a fun holiday and we enjoy candy and decorations and costumes ... but sometimes it does seem we get a little carried away.

Years ago I organized a summer day care program at the Fairport UMC called “Camp Discovery”. It was designed as a way for kids to have a safe place to be cared for while parents worked. At the same time promoting ... church! There were only two rules to Camp Discovery: 1) Love God; and 2) Love one another.

I argued that if we loved God we wouldn’t want to do anything to disappoint God

and if we loved one another ... we wouldn't do anything that would intentionally harm another person.

Did that work to maintain order and discipline with a bunch of grade school-ers? I don't remember any outrageous disregard for the two rules ... but we did discover the rules weren't always easy to obey.

That's the problem with these two commandments. They seem easy to grasp, but hard to live out.

The Apostle Paul's teaching to the early church in Thessalonica helps us when we stop to consider what those two commandments mean for ministry in the name of Jesus.

Paul writes his letter as encouragement to those early Jesus followers providing them with a profile of what exemplary ministry looks like.

This "exemplary" ministry is based on loving God and loving neighbor.

In living into those commandments Paul challenges the early church into seeing themselves as having gentle faith that believes in Jesus' way and shelters the young and cares deeply for one another.

Paul's letter is a letter of encouragement about the *nature of ministry*.

I guess that's why I like the idea of offering the neighborhood a gentle version of Halloween with Trunk or Treat. It is our opportunity to have some fun with our neighbors in a gentle and loving way. As far as I know, there won't be any blood and guts or zombies at our Trunk or Treat.

Exemplary ministry is our goal here at Covenant.

The last few weeks we've been exploring 8 ministry initiatives we will focus on in 2018. GREAT ideas have bubbled up that will enable us to live into Jesus' two commandments in the way we love God and engage our neighbors and one another in Jesus' name.

1. A mid-week Praise & Play where neighborhood children learn about Jesus and leave with their families after sharing a nutritious meal together.
2. Learning that sharing our faith has a Biblical heritage. Evangelism isn't like Halloween. There is actually Biblical preference for sharing our faith and bringing others to meet Jesus.
3. Reinterpreting the need for fundraising as a way of seeking spiritual direction in the way we raise financial support from those outside the context of the congregation.
4. Engaging in an audio and visual technology to enhance our worship experience.
5. Designing and implementing an online Bible study for those who live far from our church.
6. A Feeding Ministry that would give a literal interpretation to tending to Jesus' sheep who are hungry and in need of bread.
7. An intentional Caring Ministry that would tend to the spiritual and physical needs of our congregation.
8. Engaging in a Ministry of Presence that would explore our online and neighborhood presence and how we live into our love of God and neighbor within the context of the Beechwood and Merchants neighborhoods.

The Apostle Paul's letter gently nudges us today to explore the dynamic between the commandments to love God and love neighbor and to link it to the way we do ministry.

In your bulletins this morning is a 3/5 card. It's blank ... waiting for your thoughts about how God may be calling you into ministry. Maybe you have a vision or idea for exemplary ministry!

I know you all aren't comfortable standing up to speak about your ideas ... but if you have an idea ... write it down! Maybe you know of exemplary ministry another church is doing that might work here.

Take that 3/5 card and write down how you imagine God calling you into ministry. If you have ideas ... write them down!

If you don't have an idea ... that's ok too.

Then when the offering plate comes by, place your card in the plate. Your ideas for ministry is a form of offering!

You may remember from last week, our love affair with God is not a one-way street. Any good relationship isn't 50/50 ... it's 110% and 110%.

It's that 10% more than our all that gives us the energy and passion to love God and love others and show it in the exemplary ministry we do in Jesus' name.

Whether it's 10% of our own giving; or 10% of what is spent on Halloween ... Jesus tell us in these two commandments our faith in God and others is based on love.

And love is what governs our giving.

Our lives of faith are a journey. We are all on a life-long journey of exploring how we can point to God as our passion ... and care for one another as a way of living that passion.

In the bulletin I asked you to consider what the world might look like if there was so much love there was no room for hate. Is that even possible?

The author of Hebrews describes faith as: ... the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

It is only by faith we can answer "yes".

We may not be able to see the world as a peaceful place where hate and caustic language and inappropriate behavior seem to rule.

But by faith we have the assurance God's love for us and our love for God has the power to conquer not only hate, but death itself.

Our ministry ... our worship ... our outlook on life ... is what will insulate us from hate and inspire us in exemplary ministry.

Copious amounts of candy and scary costumes are fun... but opening our hearts (and our trunks) to widening the circle of God's love to others is the best way to live into those two simple, yet challenging commandments and bring a sense of peace to our neighborhood.

Thanks be to God! Amen.