

I AND THOU: 5 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAITH AND RELATIONSHIPS

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR: WEEK ONE

At the time, there was a debate amongst rabbis – was there a greatest commandment? Or were they all equal? They asked Jesus to try to trip him up, but instead of choosing one, Jesus chose two: The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” But he added Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Everything else, he seemed to say, were ways of fulfilling these first two.

We like to think our time is different from Jesus’ – and, of course, it is. But his was, in many ways, a time *more* ruled by oppression and hierarchy and violence. So during these last five weeks of Lent, small groups will gather to discuss how these two commandments might still be precisely what we need to trust one another in this increasingly divided and divisive time.

During each week, your small group will meet for a fun and meaningful time of debriefing on the topic at hand. What follows in these pages is a simple format to help you organize your small group time. Anyone can be the “Leader” at any time. Assign one person to be the Leader each week or just go round-robin every week, changing voices each time the “Leader” part comes up.

THE
FIRST CHURCH UCC
LENT 2023

How-to:

1. Each week, Elissa will pass out a handout with questions and quotes related to that week's sermon, to be used as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to them.** Feel free to bring your own material to supplement.
2. **Resist the urge** to focus on “what you will get” from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
3. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other's trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that's okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, “Strength lies in differences, not in similarities.”
4. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of God), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

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SCRIPTURES:

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, an expert in the law, 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."

. –Matthew 22:34-40

See also Luke 10:25-37 (the Good Samaritan)

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

-1 John 4:16-21

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

SERMON QUOTES:

"...the news cycle is constant now. I hardly think it's fair to call it a cycle. It's more like a million scattered plot points, which aggregate to form a sort of continuously rising line. And to make sense of it – because the human brain is not meant to take in so much of the world at once – to make sense of it, you have to find your own plotted line through the chaos. Listen to channels that make sense to you, and filter the other chaos away.

This was the theory of the Russian influencers. Get us into camps. Not by changing our opinions, not even really by inciting anyone to anything, but by getting us all hyped up about our own stuff. Getting us to care more deeply, more virulently, really, about the things we already believe. The more passionately I am right, the more obvious it is that you are wrong. [...] And as the narratives of our shared existence become more and more removed from each other, I think it's harder to avoid this way of thinking. When the "opposite" side's argument is a distilled, almost-parody of itself, being angry and dismissive is far easier than loving."

"When talking about loving our neighbor, we are not talking about touchy-feely love, but about an ethic of love. Love as in – I will see you, I will hear you, and I will find a way to use my life, my resources, to hear what you are saying and to bless you in this moment. We are talking about love, as was proposed by situation-ethicist Joseph Fletcher. According to Fletcher, there is one question we can ask ourselves to put ourselves on the right path: What is the most loving thing I can do in this situation?"

For Further Reflection:

One way of thinking about our Matthew text is that, for Jesus there are two central ethical components of a holy life: loving God – which is about your own, personal relationship with the Creator – and loving your neighbor, which is about our responsibility to others. You can't have one without the other. Traditionally, churches have been better at one or the other – personal salvation, or social impact. Today, evangelical, salvation-oriented churches are thriving, even as they are lacking the social impact of Jesus' message. Justice-oriented churches, however, are rapidly dying out. Loving your neighbor is exhausting work – perhaps impossible, without the strength that comes from knowing God's love personally. Each group has something the other needs, and we must be wary of any theology that says otherwise.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. What questions do you have about the reading?
2. Do you tend to emphasize love of neighbor, or love of God?
 - a. What is one way in your life you emphasize or connect with the love of God?

- b. What is one way in your life that you emphasize or practice the love of neighbor?
- 3. Why is loving God essential to loving your neighbor? Why is loving your neighbor essential to loving God?
- 4. Who comes to mind when you think of your "neighbor"?
- 5. Who has been a good neighbor to you?
- 6. The 1st Corinthians passage is Paul's answer to the question: "What does it look like to love my neighbor?" It looks like being humble—not thinking of yourself more highly than others. It looks like being gentle—take a deep breath if you feel angry, speak carefully. It looks like being patient—while waiting, focus on God instead of yourself. Love requires compassion (suffering with others), kindness (honor and consideration) and forgiveness to all.
 - a. Which of these poses the greatest challenge for you?
 - b. Does it matter who you are trying to love?
 - c. Who is most difficult for you to love?
- 7. This sermon series stems from a question asked by the Deacons – in an era of deepening polarization, how do we learn to trust one another again? Over this next week, think about who/what precisely, you distrust. Is it a group? A person? A system? An institution?
 - a. How does it feel to be invited to see, hear, and bless that person/system?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER:

Start by reading numbers 2-4 on the first page, and then sharing what motivated you to join this group. For this week, instead of sharing an experience of God, share the VERY first thing that comes to mind when you think about God. Then choose a few of these questions to direct your time together.

1. In Matthew 23:34-40, Jesus reminds people that loving God is the central task of our lives. What does this mean for you – what does loving God look like? What do you find difficult about loving God?
2. In this week's sermon we heard that the central ethic of Jesus is love. In what areas of your life are your decisions guided by this ethic of love? Are there any areas where this ethic raises difficult questions for you?
3. Why is loving God essential to loving your neighbor? Why is loving your neighbor essential to loving God?
4. Does First Church tend to emphasize love of neighbor, or love of God?
 - a. Why might both be important for us?
 - b. What is one way we might live into love of God more strongly? Love of neighbor?
5. Thinking about the quote from Elissa's sermon on Sunday, over the past few years, have you gotten more firmly entrenched in "camps"? What are they? How does this feel to you?
6. Nowhere in Scripture will you find instructions that say, "Treat your neighbors with kindness, unless their beliefs differ from yours." Looking at the 1 Corinthians passage, we see that implicit in Paul's instructions was the understanding that we are to treat all people with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We are, in fact, to love all people. This becomes more complicated when people's fundamental beliefs are not the same as yours. Rather than looking at this as a problem and trying to "fix" them, however, Paul said to see it as a way to love extravagantly, working to find unity in unexpected places.
 - a. Thinking about those with whom you find this ethical love most difficult, how might those relationships be an invitation to loving more extravagantly? *(As you discuss this, please remember that First Church is comprised of folks across the political spectrum. This question is a challenge for you to find ways to be more loving – not for others to change!)*
 - b. Can you think of a time when someone with whom you disagree has been a good neighbor to you?
7. What do you think about Joseph Fletcher's ethical question – What is the most loving thing to do in this situation? Are there situations where this doesn't apply?

Finish by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down. Keep them confidential. Pray over them for each other during the upcoming week.

Closing Prayer (feel free to say your own!): Dear God, thank you for this time together, for the blessing of these relationships. Help us keep one another in mind this week, as well as the insights and the challenges of our conversation. In your name we pray, Amen.

