

“Continue the Work of Jesus: Love God”

Mark 12:30

4-11-10

This morning we begin a four week series—really a church-wide study—on who we are as Oakland Church of the Brethren.

Some years ago we spent much time in prayer and discussion over this and were able to articulate that in our mission statement:

Continue the work of Jesus.

Love God.

Love People.

Celebrate Life.

Pass It Around!

Well, it is clear, from the conversations you had and shared with us back in January, and as the Leadership Team processed all your dreams for Oakland, our mission statement continues to uphold who we are and what we value most as Christ’s church.

God continues to work in and through us, leading us into the work for today and dreams of tomorrow. And so we are taking steps in following God’s will for us. As first steps in following through with what you as the church have shared with us, we are going to refocus and revive our mission statement. Many of you are studying it in Sunday School. This morning and in the coming weeks you will hear our Ministry Teams share specific objectives they have developed to help us as a church move forward together with all this.

By the love and grace of God through His Son Jesus Christ, we have been given Life—abundant life here and now and the hope of eternal life. We are redeemed—that is what we celebrated last week as we gathered for Easter worship. Jesus is alive.

But that was just the beginning of the story for us. Jesus was raised from the dead, and from the tomb He went to His disciples and called them out into the world. And not just for anything, but to share this Good News with everyone. The church began, grew, and here we are, called to:

Continue the work of Jesus.

And so this morning we begin with the source of all we are able to do or ever be:

Love God.

One day Jesus was teaching and someone came up to Him and asked, “Out of all the Law, what is the greatest commandment? And He said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30)

Everything begins and ends with God. We cannot do anything apart from God. It is only from a deep loving relationship with God that we are able to live and move and have our being.

But in order to talk about loving God, it makes sense that we must begin with getting some idea of who God is. Who is God? What is your image of God?

Photos of God (just run them through quickly)

There are many images that we humans have given to God since the beginning of time, through artwork, music, poetry, and others. The Apostle Paul was in Athens connecting with the people there, telling them about Jesus Christ, and he noticed, among all their other gods, they had a shrine to what they called “An Unknown God.”

I did a Google search on the internet the other day. I put in “God.” Any guesses as to how many results I got? 486,000,000 results.

Believe me when I say that there is any kind of site you could imagine having to do with God, from Christian to anything else, from the good to the weird. One had a definition to start us out:

1. God
 - a. A being conceived as the perfect, omnipotent, omniscient originator and ruler of the universe, the principal object of faith and worship in monotheistic religions.
2. One that is worshiped, idealized, or followed: *Money was their god.*
3. A very handsome man.

There is an interview with God, “God TV”, “God Hates Shrimp—a crusade against Long John Silver’s and Red Lobster”.

You get the idea. So does God hate shrimp, or is God a very handsome man?

This is nothing new. Thousands of years ago, just like today, people worshipped all kinds of different gods, idols, powers, whatever. Even God’s own people got off track, forgetting who it is that gave them life and made them a special people.

And so God, the one true and only God, comes back into the scene one day and meets up with Moses (Exodus 3), calling Moses into His service to free His people from slavery in Egypt. And Moses, being the inquiring type like so many of us, knowing that he is going to have to face his people and their looks of wonderment at Moses as to who he was speaking to, asks God, “Whom shall I say sent me?” What’s your name?

And God says, “I AM WHO I AM. Tell them ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God says to Moses, “I am the God of your ancestors.” A personal God, the God you have known for generations. And yet, God says, “I AM.” It is the name of power, presence. It is the name of God that creates, that causes all things to be.

Many years later, one of Jesus’ disciples, Philip, said to Jesus one day, “Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” The disciples were still missing something, even after all the personal time they spent with Jesus. They wanted to see God, to know God.

And Jesus said to Philip, this from John 14:9, “*Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*”

Just like anyone here on earth, if you want to get to know someone and love them, you have to spend time with them.

Jesus said, If you have seen me you have seen God.

God, in all His creative, awesome power, in His infinite being, pinpointed His love in the Man of Jesus. Yes, He came to save us, and in doing so gave us a real-life image of who He is: healing, caring, weeping, suffering, teaching, walking with us and loving us.

1 John 4:16: “*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*”

God has loved us first.

1 John 4:10 says, “*In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*”

And it is experiencing God’s love that enables us to love Him in return.

There are many moments I can name when I have felt that deep love for God. This week I filled out my ordination review form for the Church of the Brethren’s Southern Ohio District Office, and it reminded me of the day I was ordained, almost 11 years ago now.

It was a weekend like no other. My Grandmother Kontra was here from Hungary, along with my parents of course. That Saturday my family and all of us went to Bethany Seminary for my graduation. Sunday was my ordination. But in addition we also had our daughter Sara's dedication.

My family, extended family, church family, were all here. The time came for ordination and Shelley and I finally kneeled down, surrounded by the ministers of the church who laid their hands on us and prayed.

In that moment I knew that this was no longer about me, has never been just about me, but God, all of us together expressing our love for Him. It was just emptying myself before God in His service. We stood up and it was like time stood still.

In that moment of complete abandon in my love for God, God was pouring His love upon us, surrounded by community, love saying to me, "Regardless of all your flaws, all your humanness and weakness, I love you and want to use you."

The Church of the Brethren have historically held a positive view of God's love. God is love, not a tyrant or "great fist" in the sky ready to punish. That is seen in the example of Jesus throughout the Gospels, and as He said in John 3:17, that He came to save the world, not condemn it.

God's love brings out the best of who we are. God's love does not dwell on the negative.

And God says if you don't get anything else, here's what you're supposed to do in life: I want you to love Me back, because I love you and I know you.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

What do we mean when we say "I love you?"

There are many times in our lives we say "I love you" to someone—a child, parent, spouse, friend. But what do we mean when we say it? I mean, it's a phrase we can often just throw around in conversation: "Man, I loved that burger!" "I love that shirt you have on!" "I love you man!"

God tells us in the greatest commandment.

Loving God is focusing my attention on God.

"Love Him with your mind." It is focusing my mind, my thoughts, my attention on God. You can start doing that by just establishing a daily time with God. Just a few minutes during the day. It doesn't matter when you do it -- beginning of the day, middle, end of the day, where you decide I'm going to stop everything else and just be with God. Talk to Him, read His Word. Jesus talks about that when He says, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." You've got to find a place in your life to do this, make room for God. Just be yourself. Because that's all God wants—you.

And as you do this, focusing on God has incredible benefits in your lives. Isaiah 26, verse 3, *"you will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, whose thoughts are fixed on You!"* When you focus on yourself, the inevitable result are thoughts of worry, insecurity, anxiety, guilt, fear, discouragement. But when that focus shifts from me to God, from you to God, all of a sudden, you begin to sense gratitude and hope and confidence and love.

Loving God is also expressing my affection to God.

This is loving God with your heart and soul. And for some of you, this is kind of difficult because you grew up in families that weren't real affectionate or expressive, didn't say I love

you a lot. Maybe you're kind of the silent type. It's not real easy for you to express affection to God without feeling weird about it. But you don't have to be afraid of it. In Hosea 6, God says, *"I don't want your sacrifices -- I want your love! I don't want your offerings -- I want you to know me!"*

God is passionate about you. He longs for you to know Him. How about if I walked up to my wife one day and I say, "Honey, here are some flowers for you. And I am giving you these flowers for three strategic reasons: Point No. 1, I am your husband. Point No. 2, it's our anniversary. Point No. 3, husbands are supposed to give their wives flowers on their anniversary. So here." Wouldn't she be thrilled? I don't think so. Why? She wants me to love her passionately. She doesn't want duty. She wants desire. God doesn't want merely duty. He wants your desire. God wants a relationship. And He's passionate about it!

So how can I express my affection to God? Start by just saying "thanks." Start looking around at everything and start thanking God. "God, thank you for a beautiful sky today." "God, thank you for green trees and clean air." "Thank you that I woke up this morning and had something to eat." "Thank You for Jesus, for forgiving us, for our life in Him." You could go on and on. Read the Psalms in the Bible as a prayer to Him. That's a good way to start expressing your love to God.

Loving God is focusing my attention on God. It is expressing my affection to God, and **Loving God is using my abilities for God.**

This is loving God with all your strength. I have been married long enough to know that it takes more than just words to express affection. Yes, Shelley likes me to tell her, "I love you." But there's another kind of love that you need, too, to back it up. That's practical expressions of love. Sometimes there are things that need to be fixed, or errands to be run and responsibilities to be shared. And that's the practical thing where I use my abilities to show, this is not just words, I really do love you and I show it by my action.

How do we show our love for God? It's poured out from our lives when we serve others, when we worship God together, when we love one another.

1 John 4:12 says, *"No one has ever seen God."*

True. I have never gazed upon the glory of God Himself. But, verse 12 says, *"If we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us."*

God's love, our love for God, in action.

Romans 12, in the Message, *"Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, your eating, your going to work, your walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering."* Real God-centered living doesn't happen just in church. It also happens in the ordinary, routine, mundane, things of real life where you go. And that is life-transforming.

Love God. Be real before Him. Show Him your affection. Use your whole life to glorify Him. It starts today, right now. Amen.