

# ***“Love Is What You DO!”***

**Luke 10:25-37**

**James 1:22-23; 2:14-18, 26**

**1 John 4:7-12, 19-21; 3:11, 17-18**

**Sermon preached by**

**Pastor Rob Fulton**

**First United Presbyterian Church**

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Now tomorrow, of course, is VALENTINE’S DAY...that silly, fleeting time of the year when we celebrate the grand and glorious ritual of love...when, for a day...an hour...or hopefully at least for a few minutes or so...we express to those around us how much we love them. Husbands give their wives flowers or boxes of candy while wives buy their husbands those funny looking under shorts with hearts all over them. Children make their parents valentines with construction paper and lace doilies...or at least they used to...and they give their friends all those cute little valentines with Winnie the Pooh or Barbie or dinosaurs or whatever the latest trend in kids Valentine cards is these days. And for a few weeks, all the chocoholics in the world get to pig out on all the chocolate they can eat, because it is, after all VALENTINE’S DAY...that ooey-goey, mushy-gushy, sappy-sweet season of love. And everywhere you turn LOVE is in the air! In fact, I even read on one of the internet news websites the other day that we are actually “buying more love” this year than we have for the past several years...meaning, of course, that Valentine’s Day spending is on the upswing, showing that the economy is definitely improving. The article went on to say that the average American adult will spend \$116.21 this year on the person they love, with a total of \$15.7 billion in Valentine’s Day spending. And of that \$15.7 BILLION, \$3.5 billion will be spent on jewelry, \$3.4 billion on dining out, \$1.7 billion on Valentine’s Day flowers, \$1.5 billion on candy and \$1.1 billion on cards – all to let those around us know how much we love them! The article then concluded with the statement, “*We all know, of course, that money can’t buy love, but it can certainly buy a little happiness!*” REALLY?!?!

Well, if Valentine’s Day IS, in fact, a celebration of LOVE as it so often claims to be, then it seems to me that there has got to be a HIGHER concept of love than that which is normally displayed in all the silliness of the season. Cupid and chocolates and flowers, romantic love songs and heart covered underwear and mushy Valentine cards aside, surely there is more to this thing called LOVE than what normally meets the eye. Oh, don’t get me wrong! I’m all for romance! I’m all for an occasional mushy-gushy expressions of love! I’m even up for a silly little love song every now and then.

But when I read the BIBLE however, I discover a much DIFFERENT concept of love than what we so often talk about in our society these days. I discover a love that’s not nearly so much a FEELING as an ACTION...not nearly so much an EMOTION as an ENDEAVOR...not nearly so much something you EXPERIENCE as something you DO. And in order to show you what I’m talking about, let’s listen to a couple of scripture passages that might inform our thinking this morning.

**Luke 10:25-37**

**James 1:22-23; 2:14-18, 26**

**1 John 4:7-12, 19-21; 3:11, 17-18**

Now, I can’t be sure, of course, but it’s my hunch that if you were to ask a group of a hundred people to name one of Jesus’ parables, the vast majority would name the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Oh, to be sure, some would name the Prodigal Son, as well. It’s pretty well know too, of course. But of all the stories Jesus ever told...of all the parables Jesus taught...it’s my hunch that the Good Samaritan is, by far and away, the

most familiar to people. EVERYBODY knows the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And even if they don't know the SPECIFICS of the story, they know, at a minimum, the idea of helping another person who is in need...the notion of reaching out to someone who is down on their luck and needs a helping hand. It is simply one of those cultural GIVENS in our modern-day society – sort of like “Mom, Apple Pie and the American Flag”! I mean, who can argue with the Good Samaritan? It's one of those VALUES we all seem to buy into...one of those NOTIONS that everybody can agree on...one of those IDEALS we all seem to strive for – IN THEORY, that is. And then REALITY hits. And sure enough, words and actions...ideal and reality...theory and practice come flying apart and head off in opposite directions in our lives. At least they do in MY life...and maybe they do in YOUR life as well. Let me show you what I mean.

A couple of weeks ago, I was on my way from the west side of Columbus to the east side of Columbus when a buzzer on my car went off and a flashing light told me that I'd better quit ignoring the fact that my gas gage was now BELOW empty. I happen to be on Interstate 70 right at Broad Street, so I quickly got off the interstate and turned left toward downtown Columbus. Well, if you know that section of Columbus, you know that West Broad, while it isn't the WORST section of town, it isn't the BEST section of town either. And no sooner had I pulled into the gas station...which, by the way, had an attendant who sat behind iron bars and bullet proof glass and took your money through a tiny little drawer that nothing thicker than a credit card could pass through...no sooner had I pulled into this place than this rather large, scruffy-looking, obviously-down-on-his-luck “gentleman” approached me. *“Hey, buddy! My car broke down a couple of blocks down the road. Can you give me a ride to the auto supply store so I can get some parts to get it fixed?”* “Umm...umm...no, no! I'm sorry I can't,” I said, *“I've got an appointment I've got to get to and I really don't have the time.”*

*“Okay! Okay! That's cool! That's cool!”* he said. *“So can you spare me a couple a bucks so I can pay for the parts?”*

*“No, no! I'm sorry I can't,”* I answered him, not allowing my eyes to meet his. *“I don't have any cash I can give you right now.”*

*“Well, how about letting me pump your gas for you or clean your windshield or something, and then it wouldn't be charity or nothing. You'd just be paying me for the work I done.”*

I heard him say the words, but as he talked, several hundred pieces of information went through my mind in less time than it takes to say “Good Samaritan.” The man needs help—don't ever give rides to strangers—the man needs help—you give him cash and he'll just buy booze with it—the man needs help—why doesn't he call a mechanic—the man needs help—what if he can't AFFORD a mechanic—the man needs help—surely there are resources available here in Columbus to help him out—the man needs help—maybe someone else will come along and help him out.

*“No, no! I'm sorry, I can't help you!”* I answered again *“I'm not from here. But I bet if you asked around, you could find some agency or something that could help you out.”*

*“That's alright! That's cool! No problem, man! I didn't mean to bother you or nothing. You go on and have yourself a nice day now. I'm sure I can find SOME Good Samaritan whose willing to help me out.”* And off he went down the street, leaving me to wonder whether I was the Parisee or the Levite...or whether I'd be judged as a sheep or a goat when it came to the judgment day and Jesus said, *“I tell you, even as you did it (or FAILED) to do it unto one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it (or FAILED) to do it unto me.”* (Matthew 25: 26)

Knowing something in our heads is not always the same as living that something in our lives, now IS it? You know it...and I know it...and Jesus knows it too. That's why I don't want to talk about the Good Samaritan this morning. Because I'm NOT him. Besides, you already know HIS story. He's the guy in the black hat who turns out to be the hero...the scumbag outcast who is a better Jew than the Jews. He's the redneck in overalls with a Confederate Flag in the rear window of his Chevy Pickup who GIVES that guy over in Columbus a ride to the auto parts store and BUYS him what he needs and TAKES him to the nearest Goodyear Store as well, leaving his credit card number with the mechanic so the mechanic can fix the guy's car, whatever it takes. That's the Good Samaritan for you...and quite frankly, I'm not him. Who I am, I'm afraid, - is the LAWYER, the character in the story whose questions inspired Jesus to TELL the story of the Good Samaritan in the first place.

After all, the lawyer's a SMART PERSON...not only smart, but RELIGIOUS as well. I mean, he knows his religious law inside and out! What's more, he's concerned with doing what is RIGHT...doing what the LAW REQUIRES. In fact, he is SO concerned with doing what is right...with meeting the law's demands...that he follows Jesus around just WAITING for a chance to ask Jesus what seems, at least in the lawyer's mind, to be the ALL IMPORTANT QUESTION: What does my faith REQUIRE of me? What must I DO to inherit eternal life?

And which one of us DOESN'T wonder that? And who among us doesn't WANT that? For some people, of course...for MOST of us, I dare say...eternal life means HEAVEN – the jackpot at the end of the rainbow...the prize at the end of the journey...the big kahuna in the great by and by. But to hear JESUS talk about it, eternal life ALSO means hitting the jackpot NOW. Eternal life...which can also be translated from the Gospels as ABUNDANT life...life as God INTENDS for life to be...means enjoying a depth and breadth and sweetness of life that is available RIGHT THIS VERY MINUTE...not JUST when we have breathed our last and move on to the great beyond. But even if you BELIEVE that, the question still remains: How do you GET it? What must you do to EXPERIENCE it? That is the question the lawyer put to Jesus that day...asking on behalf of us all: *“What must I do to get eternal life?”*

Being the master teacher that he is, of course, Jesus doesn't answer him...not directly anyway. The lawyer wants someone ELSE to hand him the magic formula. *“Just tell me what to DO Jesus!”* But knowing that the lawyer is looking for an answer from OUTSIDE of himself, Jesus encourages the lawyer to find the answer WITHIN himself. So he turns the question back upon the lawyer. *“YOU know the answer,”* Jesus says to him. *“What is written in the law?”* The LAW, of course, is something the lawyer DOES know...and know WELL. And he answers BEAUTIFULLY!

*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* It's one of those perfect responses that would make ANY teacher proud. And Jesus TELLS him so!

*“You have answered RIGHT, my good man”* Jesus says. *“DO THIS and you will live.”* In other words, *“You have said all the right WORDS,”* Jesus tells him. *“You know in your HEAD what you're supposed to do. All you need to do now is to DO it!”* KA-THUD!

Why KA-THUD? Because that's the sound the lawyer's heart make when he hears Jesus' answer. Because the lawyer thinks about all the people he passes on his way to and from the office each day...all those people sitting on steps and sleeping on sidewalks and drinking in doorways. He thinks about the people living in their cars or under bridges or in falling down old flop houses that ought to be condemned. He thinks about the six to eight telephone calls he receives every day asking for help...for food...for medicine...for rent...for help with heating fuel. He thinks about all the work that needs to be done at his church and how many clients he's got to see and how many committees and boards he's been asked to serve on in his community and how little time he spends at home with his kids...not to mention his wife...and he wonders how in the world he's going to get it all done. He thinks of the headlines in the morning newspaper and about the fistful of letters that will be waiting for him at his office, letters asking him to send money for abused children, and AIDS victims, and handicapped veterans, and war-torn refugees, and starving kids, cancer research and the upcoming Muscular Dystrophy telethon, and his pledge to the Y, and his pledge to United Way, and his pledge to the church, and his dues for Kiwanis, and his Country Club dues, and the Little League team that needs coaching, and the Big Brother/Big Sister program that is constantly begging for volunteers. The lawyer thinks about it all and his heart goes KA-THUD because he knows there is no way on God's green earth that he can DO it all. Do this and you will LIVE? No, more like: Do this and you will DIE...of physical, emotional, and economic exhaustion.

So the lawyer does what ANY good lawyer should do. Desiring to *justify* himself, Luke tells us...which is another way of saying he wanted to get himself off the hook...the lawyer asks Jesus to define his terms. *“And who IS my neighbor?”* he asks, hoping for a little help...hoping Jesus might limit his obligation enough so that he has even a snowball's chance in you-know-where of being able to meet that obligation. *“And who IS my neighbor?”* he asks.

But what he REALLY means, of course, is *“Who is NOT my neighbor?”* Who is it that I really DON'T have to worry about because, heaven knows, I've got ENOUGH to worry about with what I'm SUPPOSED to

worry about that I don't need any MORE to worry about than what I absolutely HAVE to worry about. In other words, he wants to debate the issue...open a dialogue with Jesus...negotiate the terms...and hopefully, expose the magnitude of the problem until – with any luck – it all becomes so overwhelming...so complicated...that he can go back to his conventional life with its nice, neat, little parameters and not have to worry about it any more. *“Would you define that term ‘NEIGHBOR’ for me, Jesus?”*

*“And wanting to JUSTIFY himself, the lawyer asked ‘And who IS my neighbor?’”*

But Jesus will simply NOT cooperate. The lawyer wants to talk about LOVE and how complicated it is having a loving attitude toward love everyone all the time...how IMPOSSIBLE, really...and can't Jesus make the directions a little easier to follow...like defining who IS my neighbor, exactly?

But Jesus knows that the last thing on earth the lawyer needs is another discussion so that he can better understand the issue. Convinced the lawyer understands the issue perfectly well, Jesus tells him a story instead – the story you already know about how it does not really matter what we KNOW, THINK, BELIEVE, FEEL, or SAY about love, but what we DO about love that brings us life.

So after he has told the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus lets the lawyer answer his own question. *“So tell me, in your opinion, which of these three – the two religious types who crossed over to the other side of the road or the scumbag outcast who took care of the beaten man – which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”* Oh, it is a setup, of course. There is, to be sure, only one right answer: *“The one who showed mercy and was kind to him,”* the lawyer answered.

*“Yes! You're right!”* Jesus said, *“So YOU go and do the same! DO this and you will live!”*

Now, notice very carefully that Jesus really doesn't ANSWER the question that's asked of him. The lawyer asks, *“Who is my neighbor?”* But Jesus turns it back on the lawyer and asks *“Whose neighbor are YOU?”* *“Toward whom are you going to not just believe, think, feel or say love...but toward whom are you going to DO love?”* In other words, Jesus says, *“Who are YOU going to be a neighbor to?”*

When push comes to shove, of course, Jesus REFUSES to limit the commandment of love. What he DOES do, however, is to let the LAWYER decide how he will act upon it. What Jesus is calling him to do is NOT a leap of thought...or understanding...or knowledge...or emotion. It is a leap of ACTION. Love is not just something you KNOW, Jesus says to the lawyer. Love is something you DO! It is BEING that neighbor. It is SHOWING that kindness. It is DOING those deeds of mercy. It is ACTING OUT what you already know in your head. THAT, Jesus says, is what it means to *“love your neighbor as you love yourself.”* Love is what you DO!

Now, whatever YOU do, please don't get me wrong here. This is NOT a sermon about DOING MORE...or feeling GUILTY if you don't. God knows most of us are ALREADY people with our lives jam-crammed full of stuff we're SUPPOSED to DO. And the very next story Luke tells in his gospel is about busy, busy Martha and her lazy, lazy sister Mary, whom Jesus *praises* for lolling at his feet while busy, busy Martha scurries around whining and crying about all she has to DO. So hear me and hear me well on this: This is NOT a message about DOING MORE.

This is instead a message about not confusing the knowing...the understanding...the feeling...the thinking...or the saying of love with the DOING of love. Knowing...understanding...feeling...thinking...saying love are all perfectly fine activities. They are a lot of what our celebration of Valentine's Day is all about. But only ONE of them – DOING love – Jesus says, leads to eternal life. Only ONE of them leads to the FULLNESS of life Jesus intends for his followers to know...not just in the by and by of heaven...but in the here and now of abundant, eternal life he wants us to live RIGHT NOW.

So love GOD, Jesus says. Absolutely! And love your NEIGHBOR, too. But don't just KNOW it...or SAY it...or THINK it...or FEEL it. Instead, BE a neighbor. And let's not complicate things by arguing about specifics. Because, the truth of the matter, of course, is that you already KNOW what it means to DO LOVE.

But remember! KNOWING something is not the same as DOING something. KNOWING love is not the same as DOING LOVE! If you want the world to look DIFFERENTLY tomorrow...then go home and DO LOVE today. Everyone you meet is your neighbor. So go DO LOVE! And when you DO, you will find that you will LIVE...and live ABUNDANTLY...just like Jesus SAID you would! And THAT, my friends, is a promise you can hold on to, ALWAYS! Amen...and AMEN!

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