

Matthew 22:34-46 *Growing Together 4: In Love of God and Neighbor*
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
October 25, 2020
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When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ 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.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,
“The Lord said to my Lord,
‘Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet’ ”?
If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us: Thanks be to God.

1972, when the church celebrated its 100th anniversary, was arguably the lowest point in this church's history. Ed Ramage had been gone for eight years, but the church was still licking its wounds, and membership had taken a dangerous dive. Bob Hall, who started in 1974, was, by all reports, a rigid ex-military man and, it seems, extremely introverted. He stayed in his office, and, if anyone came to the church for help, he would hand dollars bills out his office window to avoid direct contact. He was somewhat balanced by Tom Winter, his associate, who was rebuilding the youth group, introducing the practice of Children's Sermons for the first time, and, with a small group of members, reaching out to help the people around them, including braving the crime-ridden corridors of the Redmont—which was then a pretty sketchy apartment building--to deliver meals on wheels. Overall, though, it was a fairly low-energy, inward-turned time.

Then, they called **Bob Crutchfield**, who told the Pastor Nominating Committee that if they weren't interested in doing community ministry, he wasn't coming. It was a cold winter that year, and four women died on the streets right near the church. Tom was still the Associate Pastor, and he and Crutchfield took the question to the session: what does it mean that people are dying of exposure on the streets? The answer: it means that they need to be inside.

And so, this church, which had nearly exploded over just having “negro visitors” in worship, made the decision to welcome women of every color—even transgender women—to actually sleep in the church. There was a lot of hesitation, of course, but there was a strong group of women members who made it happen, and it was a turning point for the church. This congregation became known for the shelter, and the shelter attracted volunteers from other churches all over town.

The **Rushton Child Development Center** opened twelve years later, bringing in some younger families; and in 1996 a visioning process resulted in what is still our current mission statement, which declares, among other, key things, that “**All** are welcomed and valued.”

In today’s reading from Matthew, Jesus declares that **the greatest commandment** is to love God with all one’s heart and soul and mind, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Though the church had, from its beginning, been strongly focused on mission, particularly by the women, something, in this period shifted. This congregation, which had experienced a painful humbling, began connecting in a deeply personal way to those who were hurting. Volunteering at the shelter meant eating dinner with people you might have walked by on the street. It meant staying the night in the same noisy, dark basement with them. It meant learning their names and their stories. When members who were around then are asked when

they have felt most engaged and alive in this church, over and over they say, “working with the shelter.”

But the shelter was outgrowing its space and, after all, it was a basement—dark and dismal and prone to flooding. In 1996 the church called **Eugenia Gamble** as pastor. Along with a blossoming in spirituality and membership—including **One Anothering Groups**, which fostered deeper relationships among the members—Eugenia and Associate Pastor **Susan Clayton** advocated to purchase and renovate a derelict hotel just a block away, in order to create a space “worthy of our guests’ dignity.”

This was a huge undertaking. It meant advocating with the mayor to get City backing. It also meant knocking on doors all over town to raise money, but Eugenia and Bill Matthews, together, were a formidable fundraising team. With those efforts, along with a suspiciously convenient fire, the hotel was finally acquired by the city and renovated, and the shelter moved out of our basement, and into the **First Light Shelter for Women and Children**.

Fun fact: after that fire, Eugenia and Susan actually had to provide alibis. I have this great mental image of the two of them sneaking around in ski masks, with a gasoline cans and matches!

The church continued to flourish, and to undertake risky and innovative programming, including hosting the **Birmingham Youth Service Corps**—a summer program that continued for several years, bringing together kids from inner-city Birmingham and over-the-mountain for racial reconciliation, relationship-building, and service. In Eugenia’s last year here, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) awarded to this church **the Full Gospel Award** as *the* outstanding church in the denomination for racial justice and reconciliation. Let *that* sink in after the events of the sixties!

After Eugenia left, the church called **Shannon Webster**. He had barely walked in the door when he got the bad news that, amid all the growth and activity of the previous years, the church had become massively over-extended financially, and faced an immediate debt crisis. Thankfully, a beloved member came to him with a million-dollar check. Half of that was used to start paying off the debt, and half was used to launch the **First Presbyterian Church Foundation**, to help build long-term stability. With that initial gift, a strong emphasis on giving, and growth in membership, the full debt was paid off in two years; and by the end of Shannon’s pastorate, the Foundation had grown to \$2 million dollars. Today, annual proceeds from the Foundation constitute our largest, single pledge.

Not long after Shannon's arrival, one of the Associate Pastors, **Drew Henry**, left. Drew had been key in attracting and retaining young families. At the same, it was clear that the church couldn't afford two associates, so it reduced to one.

Unfortunately, the remaining associate, who was to have focused on Christian Education and young families, had to go on an extended sick leave from which she was not able to return. By the time she left, Christian Education was floundering. Eventually, **Patti Winter was brought in as Christian Educator**, but two years later the **HVAC system died**, leaving the church with no heating or cooling in the sanctuary for months. This seems to have been the last straw for a number of families who had been just hanging on; and several left.

Meanwhile, the church continued to look outward. While the ministry of the shelter at First Light remained, and remains, a core part of this church's identity, there was a **gradual shift from just addressing the immediate needs of those who are suffering, to addressing the root causes**. Because one of those causes, racism, was such a strong part of our church's past, the church decided to mark the **50th Anniversary of the events of 1963** by having an intensive period of study and reflection on that history. This was an undertaking of the entire congregation, and it included hosting commemorations for the larger community, and inviting Ed Ramage's children and grandchildren back, in order to extend to them a formal apology for the way the church had treated him.

That whole experience provided much-needed clarity and closure, as well as strengthening the church's resolve to work for justice. Shannon helped to launch what is now **Faith in Action Alabama**, and began a campaign against **Payday Lending** that was recognized by President Obama; and **The Going Forward Plan** declared the church's commitment to **Speak Up, Reach Out, and Build Bridges**.

When Jesus commands us to love God, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, it sounds so simple. But first, we have to have a sense of who God is—and our church's understanding of God's priorities has changed significantly since its early days. *Then*, we have to figure out who our neighbors truly are. That understanding continues to expand.

After Shannon's retirement, during Cat Goodrich's interim, the **Turquoise Table** was set out front as a sign of welcome, creating many new relationships. It was still there when I arrived, and it helped me to learn the names and stories of many of our neighbors until, unfortunately, it became a magnet for violence and had to be removed. But here's the thing: some of those same women who had become regulars at that table actually helped to alert us to the problem, and even helped carry the table out of the front yard and into the courtyard.

Also during Cat's interim, the groundwork was laid to become a **More Light Congregation**, opening our arms to the LGBTQI community; to become an **Earth Care Congregation**; and to start **opening our chapel** to the community on Wednesdays.

Just since I've been here, we've become part of a **Faith-Based Partnership** to help the various congregations involved in homelessness to coordinate efforts and become more strategic in addressing the causes; we've begun building a relationship with **Westminster Presbyterian** through joint study and conversation; we've responded to the **Racial Reckoning** and protests with a **21-Day Racial Equity Challenge** that a lot of you participated in; and we've deployed a **Voter Engagement Team** through Faith in Action to help under-represented Alabamians exercise their right to vote.

We've also become a **Matthew 25 Congregation**, joining a movement in the larger denomination to build congregational vitality, dismantle structural racism, and eliminate systemic poverty.

And in the meantime, just in the last few years, in addition to the HVAC, this church has dealt with a falling tree and leaking roof and crumbling plaster; we've responded publicly and transparently to the fallout of past sexual misconduct; we've innovated and pivoted and innovated again on ways of doing children's

ministry in these changing times; and now, we're innovating ourselves right through the third pandemic in our church's history.

So some things never change. But other things do.

You may have noticed in previous weeks, as we've reviewed other periods in our history, that pastor after pastor was eased out, fired, or left here feeling like a failure. I certainly took note of that. But your most recent past-pastors refer to their time here as "The high point of my ministry," and "The church of my heart." It appears that, **as this congregation has grown better at loving your neighbors, you've also grown better at loving one another.** Who'd have thought it?

There has been never a dull moment in the history of this church, but it kind of seems like the moments of challenge and brokenness, the moments of vulnerability, have opened the heart of this church in a way that power and privilege never could. And here we are now—striving to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves in every way we can—yearning to be together, yet continuing our mission, which isn't just *our* mission.

Our psalm today notes how fragile and fleeting we humans are—and how all we can really rely on is God. That, at least, never changes. And so, with the generations that began this journey and are now gone, we lift up our own flawed and faltering efforts, in our own time of turmoil and uncertainty; and with humility and deep love, we pray:

“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper *for* us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands!”