

**Ambassadors of the Kingdom**  
**November 1, In the Year of our LORD, 2009**  
First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Gloversville, New York  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Mark 12:28-34

To believe is to care, to care is to do.  
Love of God, love of neighbor and love of self.

What those two triads have in common is that in a number of ways people misunderstand part or all of the underlying ideas and theories of each.

The first, “to believe is to care, to care is to do” are words that grace our new newly rededicated church sign. It would be a mistake, however, to think of them only in sequence. While true that we of the reformed tradition put emphasis on faith, on that which we believe as the foundation of all else (indeed Martin Luther seemed to go further with his words “faith alone”), but the truth of the matter is that while sincere belief leads people to care for others and that caring for others instills a desire to do for others, all three are part and parcel of each other. For example, there are many persons who in the act of doing something good for others come to terms all the more with what they believe which instills yet more caring which leads to more doing ... round and round it goes – in a good and productive journey that leads each of us ever closer to becoming faithful servants of the living God.

The second of those triads comes right out of today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark. Let us remember that Jesus often took words from what we call Old Testament Scripture and repackaged them, presented them in new and fresh ways for the people of God. The first part of the “Great Commandment,” love of God with all of ones being, comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The second part, the reminder to love neighbor as self, comes from Leviticus 19:18. Jesus made it very clear that love of God, neighbor and self are not only essential, but are reflections of each other. Indeed, remember these words from 1 John (5:20)?

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

Jesus’ point was simple or least He intended it to be so. One doesn’t love God, neighbor or self in some sort of sequence. One either loves all three in uplifting and positive ways or one is lacking in all three of those areas of ones calling. And, to be an ambassador, that is a spokesperson, representative, and advocate for God and God’s kingdom, means accepting, living *and sharing* that sense of believing, caring, doing; loving of all that is.

On this All Saints Day, a day when we celebrate the lives of all of people, dead and living who did and do God’s bidding, who accomplish holy and blessed things, it behooves us to be reminded of some of the basic tenets of our faith, to remember the foundations on which our faith is built and to hear again the call of God to live as saints.

Again, ever so briefly, let's have a spelling, grammar and word usage lesson. Were you to see the word "saints" in print in the middle of a sentence where capitalization is not automatic, we need to realize there is a difference between Saints (with a capital S) and saints (with the regular, non-capitalized, smaller letter). There are Christian traditions who make much of (large S) Saints – of those special persons believed to have demonstrated particularly holy behavior that in essence puts them a level above the rest of us, members of "mere" humanity. It will come as no surprise that the use of (capital S) Saints is not part of our reformed perspective, that instead, we think of (little s) saints as any and all of us who do God's will, who live in a way driven by the dreams, visions, and expectations of our God. That we are not always, if not all that often "saintly" does not detract from those moments that we are. I consider myself blessed this morning to look out at a sea of saints.

As I composed this sermon, I did, for a brief moment, think of professional football. At this point in the season, the New Orleans football team, the Saints, boast a record of 6-0. As you can imagine, the city, still recovering from Katrina, is using that as a reason to stand proud. Saints' fans are, however, as fickle as any in the sports world, and whenever the team is horrid (and there have been those years!), fans in New Orleans are known for putting paper bags over their heads with the word "Aints" written on them. Suffice it to write no one will be wearing bags over their heads at the Superdome tomorrow evening when the Saints host the Atlanta Falcons!

Unfortunately, when many of us think of the Superdome, as restored as it is, we are reminded of how this nation witnessed all too many examples of saint-less behavior in the days of and immediately after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast – particularly in the overcrowded, disaster ridden Superdome in New Orleans. Oh, there were plenty of (little s) saints who participated in the rescue of so many in that city – but our ability as a nation, the State of Louisiana and the City of New Orleans to act in ways that demonstrated immediate concern for the poor of that city goes down in our nation's history as a time when characterized for being "aints" as much as there were moment when people were (little s) saints.

As ever, the choice is ours. When it comes to our daily lives, to those moments when we have a choice to do good for others, are we (little s) saints or are we aints?

Do we have a healthy, non-narcissistic love of self, one that makes room for self-reflection? Do we affirm that to love oneself as God would have us is to embrace the idea that life is an ongoing journey of self-discovery? Do we, for example, recognize on this day when we welcome new members into our midst that church membership is not something that ends with a litany of affirmation of faith but is as much a new beginning whereby we affirm that *all of us* are *still* on a journey and that together, with a newly crafted definition of "we", we might learn all the better the ways of our God?

Do we truly love neighbor – oh, and that means everyone, not just those who look like us, talk like us, go to the same church as we, or live on our street? Here I need to take a step back and tell you that there is good news when it comes to my memories of New Orleans – and in particular as a result of the trip sixteen of us from Gates Presbyterian Church took a year after Katrina to help with the cleanup. I think of those, like Sally, who donned protective clothing and masks to help clean out homes where the flood line was over most of our heads. I think of Bob Binko, under a home, trying, somewhat in vain, to teach me some basic plumbing. I think of Josephine (Jo) Fish, in her seventies, up on a roof, at the end of a long day, insisting that

everyone stay on that roof and finish the job – that there was no time to rest. The irony is that the best photo of the (now late) Jo Fish (she was suffering from cancer when she was on that roof) – the best photo of her is at the end of that day, sitting in a chair, completely exhausted. She had good reason to be exhausted from working all day. We wish we had a photo of her on that roof lecturing, cajoling and demanding the work get done! I think of Jake Morris, a High School senior, who had never worked on a roof before, standing among the trusses there in Musician's Village, taking 4 foot by 8 foot pieces of sheathing from my hands and lifting them into place, his feet easily straddling trusses for support, working as though he had been done that kind of work for years. Note: my level of expertise meant that I was asked to help build crude saw horses on which others then did more exacting work!

Love of God. It all comes back to that. When all is said and done, love of God is the end-all. That is why we are here. Love of God is why we look to what will be a bright future for Christ's church – which includes this enclave, this congregation of God's faithful servants. It is love of God that engenders the rest – love of neighbor, love of self, belief, caring, doing. It is when we realize all of those ideas and motifs are wrapped up in each other, that they are indeed inseparable, that they aren't even sequential, that we get the essence of Jesus' claim that to call what sounds to humans like two commandments one and that our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God are One makes perfectly good sense – and that in embracing those ideals, and going forth as ambassadors of God, we might very well lay claim to our place among the (little s) saints.

May the people of God respond in faith with an Amen.

Amen.