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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34
“All you need is love...and a good meal”

The gospel text is one of the most famous in scripture. One never tires of hearing it. It's the kernel of our faith and the best that any religion can say of itself.

The Hebrew passage is also popular in Christian and Jewish circles. That's why many biblical families name their baby girls “Ruth.” For Jewish families, it's ironic because Ruth wasn't Jewish. Nevertheless, she's an exemplar of love and faithfulness. It's included in our service because it's one of the church-appointed readings for today.

In the gospel story, a scribe asks Jesus for the first commandment of all. Perhaps he expected Jesus to tell him the first of the 10 commandments. Jesus gives him the 10 in two then says it's one. He says, “The first is, ‘...the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Neighbor is everyone in the world.

The scribe's response is equally fascinating. He replies: “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one's neighbor as oneself,’ — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

In Jesus' day, the scribe would be seen as a greater authority than an itinerant, formally unschooled teacher. But the gospel writers see the two personalities as equally matched; kind of like sparring partners in a boxing ring.

The final paragraph bears this out. “When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.” Jesus has the final say and thereby establishes his authority as an equal.

The important thing is that both Jesus and the scribe are on the same page although with different nuances. The gospel writer effectively drives home the point that love of God and neighbor are central to what we are about as Christians and as adherents of the Jewish religion.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney got the point in their famous song: “All you need is love.” They wrote:

“All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need.”

Their message is crystal clear. It's what Jesus and the scribe say but the latter say it more expansively. Love of God and neighbor are entwined. One's love of God enriches one's love of neighbor. The more you love God the better your love of neighbor will be.

One loves one's neighbor through one's love of God which is better than loving from a purely human point of view where all kinds of motives can be in play. When God is in the picture one's love is pressed to be true and sincere. Every human being has a God-center which can be activated for authenticity and genuineness.

Today, we come to the table of Holy Communion which some call a love feast. It is love in that it's a tangible way of communing with God and with each other. It is love and a good meal. Love must be accompanied with tangible expression.

Holy Communion is an excellent expression of our love of God and neighbor. Since we just commemorated Reformation Sunday I'll share some Reformed thoughts about Holy Communion before we move into the celebration later in the service.

First the name: Holy Communion is primarily called Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. The Lord's Supper looks back to the final supper Jesus had with his disciples in the upper room. We've seen the paintings. It also recalls the breaking of the bread by the resurrected Jesus in the disciples' home on the Emmaus Road. "Eucharist" is "thanksgiving" in Greek. We give thanks at the table and eat.

Holy Communion is one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church. The other is baptism.

Jesus is symbolically present in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup. It's a holy meal and never done in private. That's why we call it, "Holy Communion."

Holy Communion is an outpouring of thanks for what God has done throughout history and continues to do in and through you and me, the church.

Holy Communion is act of remembering. When Jesus said: "Do this in remembrance of me," he was reminding us to recall the acts of God in his life, death and resurrection. Those who remember correctly become part of the story of salvation.

Holy Communion is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the enlivening force in our words and actions. Among the Reformed there is the caution that Christ's presence should not be confused with the bread and wine, a concept too confining and narrow. The mystery and breadth of Christ's presence must be preserved. We strongly stress that it is through the un-confinable work of the Holy Spirit that Christ is present to us.

Holy Communion is "table fellowship." We gather around the table as family. We affirm our relationship with God and with each other.

Holy Communion expresses sacrifice. The sacrifice of Christ, rightly remembered, results in lives willing to be broken and poured out for others.

Holy Communion is communion with God. The basic and primary meaning of *this communion* is the gift of union with God in Christ and we become bearers of that gift beyond this communion.

Holy Communion is an act of prayer. In Holy Communion we acknowledge our absolute dependence on God. The elements are not consecrated in Holy Communion. We are consecrated to be partakers with Christ in his resurrection. Our prayer is to be faithful, loving and compassionate.

Holy Communion is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet and therefore an expression of hope. The meal we share together with God and with each other sustains us forever.

And as God sustains us in this meal we are called to sustain our neighbors near and far in practical ways. We are fed so we can feed others, especially the hungry. Holy Communion is love in action.

The wise scribe in our gospel story today states that love of God and neighbor are more important than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. If Holy Communion does not confirm our love of God and neighbor it is not properly exercised and experienced.

Jesus called everyone to himself therefore everyone is invited to the table of Holy Communion. Everyone is welcome. As for the connection of love with Holy Communion, we have it here at Redwoods Presbyterian Church. Amen.