

# **From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church Sunday, January 18, 2015**

## **Preacher: Rev. Julie Olmsted, Candidate for Settled Pastor**

**Scriptures:**

**Psalm 159:4-6**

**Mark 12:30-31**

**1st Corinthians 13 (selected verses)**

## **Sermon: The Whole Gospel**

A pastor preaches his first sermon in a new church on the subject of brotherly love. After the services the elders come to him with absolutely glowing praise. “We are so glad you responded to God’s call and became our new preacher! We have heard a lot of preachers over the years and that was the best sermon we have ever heard! The new pastor accepted their praise graciously and thanked them for their kind words.

The very next Sunday this new pastor preached with the same enthusiasm, passion and encouragement, the exact same sermon. Again the elders came to see him after the service to let him know what they thought. “Well, pastor, you did a fine job, a fine job, indeed. We’ll see you next week.” Once again he thanked the elders for their support.

On the third Sunday this bold pastor preached the exact same sermon in the exact same manner. Three weeks in a row. The elders of the church took him aside this time. “Pastor, we know you love the subject of brotherly love and you’re certainly excellent at teaching and preaching it, but we would just like to know if you’re going to give a sermon on a different subject anytime soon.”

The pastor thought about it for a moment and replied, “Well, that depends. Are you going to start loving each other anytime soon?”

This is the preacher’s challenge: to preach the same sermon every week, with different words and different texts. Much like a diamond with different facets that the light shines through in different ways, the whole gospel is to be preached with a different angle...every single week.

If I want my house cleaned I might give someone a list. That list might have some things on it like: take all the things that look or smell funny out of my refrigerator and throw them away. Wipe the shelves clean and then the outside and the top. Remove

everything from the cabinets; throw away those items whose expiration date has passed. Wipe out the shelves. Wipe down and shine all the surfaces in the kitchen, then sweep the floor, mop the floor and put anything that you are unsure about, like papers or mail, in the corner of the room, for me to do something with later. Move on to the living room, where you will dust, vacuum the stairs and hallway, living room and bedrooms. Be sure to mop the entryway, and then move on to the bathrooms. Once there you will need to... I could go on, but you are getting the picture. This is the kind of thing I had to do (and still do, to a degree) with my kids. Although they are getting better and better as time goes by. Instructions need to be less and less detailed. As it is with any new undertaking: after practice, after sufficient instruction and after many, many conversations, it starts to become second nature. I can at some point simply say, "Clean my house, please!"

Recently my husband and I celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary. In our wedding vows, we promised to not only love, honor, support and cherish one another, but we also wrote our own vows and declarations of love. In those vows we said that we would "serve each other in all ways, great and small," all the days of our lives. Now, that went a bit against the grain of the eighties. And, for the first few years as our "resistance" was being broken down, it wasn't always easy. I even said a couple of times that each passing year was like "another iron curtain dropping down on my past." That was a good thing in terms of my marriage. It meant that each year I became more and more "married," more and more like-minded with Jeff, and more and more willing to find ways to fulfill those vows. Bring you coffee in the morning? Sure. Help you find your keys or your wallet when you're trying to get out the door in a hurry? No problem. Wrap up the cheese or close the bag of Doritos after your snack? No way! Well, yes, even that. I have counseled couples to go back and review their wedding video and actually take a look at those vows they made. Because you can explore forever what it means to love, honor and even obey. See, you don't ever get your vows "done," any more than you brush your teeth once and for all! There were people in Jesus' day that knew the law and obeyed the law. But the spirit was missing. The heart was not engaged. It was more or less all for show. As a Jew, Jesus knew plenty of scholars and rabbis and fellow observant Jews that were missing the point altogether. That is why he became known as the living word. It was as though he ate the word of God and then became it. Those who have learned another language or a musical instrument, know that there is a place in your learning process where you no longer need to stop and think, to review any books or music; you have it, you ARE it. No daylight between you and your undertaking. That is the embodiment of Jesus. That is the practice of our faith, and it takes a lifetime.

How many of you have known individuals who knew the Bible and could quote chapter and verse? How many of you have known individuals who knew chapter and

verse but did not seem very loving at all? See, the whole gospel is not chapter and verse. The whole gospel is not even going to church every week for your entire life. We read the Bible, we go to church; we give of our resources, all for the purpose of this one commandment: Love God, love others. On this hangs all the law and the prophets, Jesus said. And we as Christians, particularly reformed Christians, are to look at all scripture through this critical lens: Is it loving? Does it reflect the love of Christ? And so, it is never done. It is a lifelong undertaking. It is ongoing and it never ends. It's like going east. If I said to you, "I'm going 'east'" and I go to Boston, I've done what I said. But you would agree, there is more "east" to go, amen? In this walk of following Christ, there is always more "east" to go as well. There are always more ways for us to follow the gospel, this mandate to love God and love others. It's not about church attendance any more than it is about chapter and verse knowledge, although both those things are a very good idea. It's not about giving or serving in a mission project of some kind, but we know that this is part of it, just like bringing someone coffee or asking how things are going for them. And it's not about being perfect, although it is about looking to see, where can I be helpful, how can I make someone happy today, and God, where would you have me go, what would you have me do, and what would you have me say, and to whom?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her beloved: How do I love thee, let me count the ways? Now, she could have simply said, "I love you, I love you, I love you..." But then there would have been no poetry, no romance, no vision of her love. That would be like the new pastor who preached the same sermon three times in a row. So with us, loving God and loving our neighbor can be an act of creativity, of romance and of vision. But we need to come at it with passion and commitment. What is God calling me to do, to say, to create? How could I love my neighbor? What neighbor needs something that I could give?

This, my friends, is the whole gospel. Love God; love your neighbor. And what that means for us is a lifelong project, or perhaps better said, a lifetime work of art. Our job is to keep asking the questions and responding to guidance, with an attitude of willingness, humility and joy. Then, you and I shall truly live.

Note: After the service, at a meeting of the Congregation, Rev. Julie G. Olmsted was, by enthusiastic voice vote, unanimously called to be TCC's Settled Pastor.