

(9th Sunday after Pentecost)

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July 22, 2018

John 13:33-35

I am a Christian. I am a follower of Jesus Christ. As a follower of Jesus Christ, I am commanded to be faithful to the new commandment he has given his disciples - to love one another as I have loved you.

It seems pretty simple and straightforward commandment. So it should be easy for us, as followers of Jesus, to live out this commandment in our daily lives and through our ministry both here at OCPC and as a part of the larger Christian Church community.

Yet, what if we were living back in the 1930s, say, in Germany? How would we as followers of Jesus live out this commandment?

In the early 1930s, the population of Germany was close to 60 million. Most of German citizens were "Christian". Since, as legend has it, Martin Luther had nailed his 95 Theses to the Castle Wittenberg Door, most Germans were members of the German Evangelical (Lutheran Church). The second largest Church population were Catholic. There were Methodist, Baptists and a few other church groups as well. The Jewish population was less than 1% of the population.

As Hitler and his Nazi Party rose to power, most Christians and their clergy welcomed him as their leader. Most joined the Nazi Party. This was in part due to the social changes and the great sense pride in their country. This is called "Nationalism". Hitler even promised that the Nazi Party values were perfectly in line with "Christianity". His goal was to unify all "Christians" under the Nazi flag with himself as the glorified head of the Church.

Article 24 of the 1920 Nazi Party Platform had affirmed this with these words: **"We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not jeopardize the state's existence or conflict with the manners and moral sentiments of the Germanic race. The Party as such upholds the point of view of a positive Christianity without tying itself confessionally to any one confession. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and is convinced that a permanent recovery of our people can only be achieved from within on the basis of the common good before individual good."**

With the swell of Nazi nationalism, (Germany first) many party members, including those in the SS and military could be found in church every Sunday with the Nazi flag being prominent in the sanctuary.

Out of this pride of country first, a new Christian "Church" movement sprang up. It was called the German Christian Church. Its leaders openly supported Hitler and the Nazi Party, and were members of it. A slogan used by these group proclaimed: **"The State of Adolf Hitler appeals to the Church, and the Church has to hear his call."** Any clergy who were not "Aryan" were defrocked and removed from their congregations.

In opposition to this movement, another opposing group formed what is known as the "Confessing Church". Its leadership included Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth.

It was out of this “Confessing Church” movement that the Declaration of Barmen was written. At its center, was “Idolatry,” which said that placing any person, political leader or party above God, was against God’s commandments.

What is in dispute, is that neither “Christian” Church and its leaders spoke up in support of their Jewish neighbors and citizens and against Hitler’s extermination of them. Perhaps that was because anyone who did, was arrested (Hitler had 700 clergy arrested in one day for defying him), sent to concentration camps, or killed. Or was it their own anti-Semitism?

Yet, not all people who were a part of the Protestant or Catholic Churches joined the Nazi Party or remained silent to the gross atrocities taking place under Hitler. Many broke the “law,” risking their lives to help their Jewish neighbors. Many were arrested and executed for doing so.

Eventually, Dietrich Bonhoeffer could remain silent no more, and in an effort to stop Hitler, helped plot to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested and then hanged for his role.

All of this leads me to ask, as a follower of Jesus, a “Christian,” what would I have done if I was living in Nazi Germany? Would I have joined the Nazi Party and supported Hitler? Remaining silent as my non-Aryan clergy colleagues were removed from their pulpits and my Jewish neighbors and community members rounded up and sent off to concentration camps to die? Or would I have had the courage to risk my life by speaking out against the evil Hitler and his party, who were also my friends and neighbors, were engaged in? Would I have had the courage to risk my life to help aid or hid my Jewish neighbors?

What about you? How would you have responded to Christ’s command to love God and my neighbor as myself, knowing that your neighbor was Jewish, and who by law, you were required to turn in? Would you have obeyed the law and turned them in or would you have disobeyed the law, and risk your life and your families life, and like others, hid them?

Jesus himself was Jewish. Would you have hid him and his family, seeking to protect and save them?

I wonder what it would have been like to have been an early follower of Jesus living under the oppressive regime of Rome, knowing that many others, who followed Jesus, were being persecuted and even killed?

Would I (we) have had the courage like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego to refuse to obey King Nebuchadnezzar’s command to bow down before him and his golden statue of himself, knowing that it would cost me my life? Would I have trusted God to protect and save me, if in the end, I was killed?

Those are tough questions for us to wrestle with and answer.

Thank goodness, we live in America, right. But then again, what would we do if we were living during the time of slavery? Would we have opposed it or supported slavery? What if you knew your friends and neighbors were going to lynch a black person - a man, woman or child (and we did lynch over 7,000 human beings simply because of the color of their skin)?

How would you or I have responded to these and so many other situations as followers of Jesus who are commanded to love one another as we have been loved by God in Christ?

Over the past several months, as our Affirmation of Faith, we have read through both the Declaration of Barmen and the Reclaiming Jesus Confessions. Both were written by

groups of faith leaders who challenged the views and beliefs of the political leaders of their respective nations and people of faith like us.

These are difficult times, and we are divided. If you are like me, it is hard to talk to my family these days. Relationships are strained among friends, and even in church.

So how do we who profess Jesus as Lord and not Caesar, Hitler or any other King or President as Lord, address issues facing us today?

We are not the first to have to do so. But we cannot remain silent. Jesus didn't and it cost him his life. The same is true of many others who have sought to be faithful to Christ in their daily lives and public witness to love their neighbors - even when rules and laws and political leader and public opinion run against Christ's command.

So here is what I would like us to do. Over the next three Sundays, we are going to engage in respectful, thoughtful, reflective, prayerful, scriptural conversation using both the Declaration of Barmen and the Reclaiming Jesus alongside of Scripture to discuss who we are and what we are being called to do as followers of Jesus today.

Each week, there will be questions for us to use to guide our discussions. In answering and sharing, we will only be able to speak in "I" sentences, not "we" (I feel or I think or I believe). We will begin here in the sanctuary, and then move into the Fellowship Hall for the remaining part of worship, breaking into small groups of 5 or 6. Each table will have a specific discussion facilitator. Our Fellowship Food providers are aware of this, and will have coffee and beverages and some food for us to share. We will conclude each time with a group sharing, prayer, hymn, and blessing.

It will be different, and may be filled with some silence. Yet, I feel we are called to be life-long learners as followers of Jesus, the Beloved Children of God. As Jacob wrestled with God on the banks of the river Jabbock, and as the writers of these statements of faith wrestle with God in their own way, we too must wrestle with very serious questions about our own beliefs as we seek to live out Christ's command to love one another, even when we don't like the "other" very much.

- If we already had the 10 Commandments and all the other rules in the Bible, I wonder why Jesus felt they had to give them this new commandment.
- When do we find this commandment easy?
- When do we find this commandment difficult?
- What stood out for you in listening to this statement?
- For you, I wonder what it means to be a Christian first and everything else second?
- For you, what does it mean that Jesus is Lord? What does that look like in your life?
- How would our fellow citizens know we are Christians by our love?
- What does it mean to commit ourselves as Christians today?