

FUNDAMENTALS

Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Most of us recognize Penn State's Joe Paterno as a great coach because he emphasizes the fundamentals of the game. No fancy uniforms. No dancing in the end zone. No fancy, razzle-dazzle plays. Just blocking. Fundamental tackling. In the past, Penn State has been able to beat teams with greater talent because they had mastered the fundamentals. But this year, Penn State has been uncharacteristically sloppy in executing the fundamentals. Dropped passes. Too many penalties. Blocked punts. Fumbled balls. Maybe that's why, despite great talent, they haven't done so well. We need to master the fundamentals if we want to succeed. Nowhere is that more true than when it comes to making progress in our relationship to God.

Our Gospel lesson talks about the fundamentals of the faith. A lawyer listened to a discussion between Jesus and some religious leaders. He was impressed by the way Jesus handled their questions. There was a depth to his teaching and a shrewdness to the way he avoided the traps set for him. The lawyer decided *he* would ask Jesus a question. "Which commandment is the first of all?" What is the fundamental thing God wants from us? Jesus answered, "The first is, '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.'" In other words, the one *fundamental* commandment – what God wants from us more than anything else - is love. God wants us to love him.

Take a look at the words Jesus uses to describe how to love God. In Hebrew thought forms the heart includes the soul, the mind and strength. Jesus claimed that it is of fundamental importance for us to love God whole-heartedly. A wholehearted love for God includes our minds, our souls, and our strength.

First, a whole-hearted love for God involves our minds. John Wesley once received a critical letter from a Christian who declared, "The Lord has directed me to write you that, while you know Greek and Hebrew, he can do without your learning." Wesley replied, "Although I already know that the Lord can do without my learning, I wish to say that, while the Lord does not direct me to tell you, yet I feel compelled to tell you on my own responsibility, that the Lord does not need your ignorance either."

Some Christians disparage the mind. "If you're too smart, you're liable to lose your faith." Some Christians fear learning. Don't read science. Don't read novels. Don't get involved in philosophy. You'll lose your faith. But the church has always captured some of the brightest minds for Christ. Think of C. S. Lewis! What an intellect that man had. He loved God with his mind. He used his mind to explain the Christian faith to millions of men and women through his books. Many Christian women intellectuals have challenged and strengthened my faith like Dorothy Sayers, who not only wrote mystery thrillers, but was a brilliant medieval scholar and outstanding Christian apologist.

We don't have to be scholars like Lewis or Dorothy Sayers to love God with our minds. We don't have to be brilliant, highly educated intellectuals. God has given all of us minds to love God. Love God with your minds. Ask questions about the world, science, ethics, politics! Think about the lyrics to the music you listen to and relate it to your Christian faith. Get involved in a Bible Study or book discussion. Our God is a God of truth. God is the source of all truth. We don't need to fear truth no matter where it's found – even if it's in Darwin or Freud. All truth is God's truth no matter where it's found. All truth can help us love God with our minds. Loving God whole-heartedly with our minds is fundamental to the Christian faith.

Secondly, God wants us to love him with our emotions. In biblical thinking the soul, not the heart, is the seat of the emotions. A whole-hearted love for God includes our feelings. Imagine a young man proposing marriage to a woman. "Will you marry me?" She responds, "Why?" He calmly replies, "My computer matched us." I doubt she'd be impressed by such a cold, technical reason. Our minds are important but God also created us with emotions. True love has reasons that the mind knows nothing of. Deep love for someone makes us laugh and cry; it raises our blood pressure and throws our deepest feelings into turmoil. Emotional love produces poetry and song.

God wants us to love him with our emotions. Of course, we can't manufacture emotional love. Emotional love is a response to the One who is the source of all love. A Roman Catholic priest announced to his congregation that he was going to preach on the love of God. Stepping down from the pulpit, he took a lighted candle from the altar and walked over to the great crucifix. Without saying a word he held the candle so

that all could see the nail-pierced feet of the dying Savior. Then he lifted it to the wounded side and pinioned hands. Finally, he let the flame fall on the agonized face and head crowned with thorns. He said not a word. And yet the impact of his sermon was powerful – bringing tears to the eyes of some parishioners.

Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

A whole-hearted love for God involves our feelings. Jesus said it's of fundamental importance to love God with all our soul – with our emotions.

Thirdly, God wants us to love him with our strength. Love for God in action. Here's where a whole-hearted love for God begins to overlap with love for neighbor. Jesus said that when we love one of the least of his brothers and sisters we show love to him. When we love others in concrete ways we are loving God with our strength. How can we love God with our strength. Visit shut-ins! Run errands! Volunteer at Ware Presbyterian Village. Become active in your political party! Advocate for social reform. Spend vacation time using your vocational skill at a mission station. Our Church plans at least one work mission opportunity a year to nurture loving God with all our strength. Last summer we expressed love for God building a Habitat Home in Philadelphia. The Confirmation class planted dune grass on Cape Henlopen. For two summers we restored homes in Appalachia. Fundamental to our faith is a wholeheartedly love for God that expresses itself in action.

A wholehearted love for God that involves our minds, our emotions and our energy is fundamental to our faith. So often we want to love God with only a part of ourselves. That's like flying in a three engine jet with only one engine working. That reminds me of a Scottish couple flying to the states for the first time traveling on a three- engine DC-10. Half way over the Atlantic the voice of the pilot came over the loud speaker. "Ladies and gentleman, I regret to have to inform you that one of our three engines is no longer functioning. Be assured that this poses no threat to our safety. The DC-10 is designed to fly safely with only two engines. I do regret, however, that we'll be in the air a little longer than planned and will be arriving at Kennedy airport one hour late. Twenty minutes later the voice of the pilot again came over the loud speaker. "There is no cause for alarm, however, a second engine is no longer functioning. I assure you that this plane is perfectly capable of flying with only one engine. However, with only one engine we will be in the air an

additional 4 hours." The old Scotsman turned to his wife and said, "I do hope that third engine doesn't go. We'll be up here all night if it does."

The point is that some of us are trying to love God with only one engine. Sometimes we Presbyterians try to keep our love for God airborne on the engine of the intellect alone. I'm proud of our Presbyterian tradition which emphasizes the intellect and a learned ministry but if our love for God isn't felt deeply and acted out, we'll have only a passionless love of little comfort in life or death. Or sometimes we try to keep our love for God flying on the one engine of feeling alone. Our whole religion is one of feeling. No thought. Not action. Just feeling. Emotionalism. We go to church when we feel like it. We pray, but only when we feel like it. We give when we feel like it. But felt love isn't enough. If we try to love God with our feelings alone we'll crash land for sure. A Christian simply can't fly on the one engine of emotion. Or sometimes we try to keep our love airborne on the engine of the will alone. We run ourselves ragged in feverish activities and community involvement. We work hard at overcoming sin and temptation in our lives. That's all good. But if that's the only engine that's keeping our love for God soaring, we're led back to legalism and self-righteousness.

God wants our love for him to soar on three engines. Fundamental to our faith is a whole hearted love of God involving our minds, our emotions and our wills. The Psalmist said it all when he wrote.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Let's get back to fundamentals. Here's a fundamentalism that Presbyterians can wholeheartedly affirm; a whole-hearted love for God that involves our minds, our emotions and our wills.