

Wig-wam
Tee-pec
too Tense - Two tents

Firsts: First of the year on Wed.

First time you ~~grad~~ of your machine

First time you haven't had a manna for your pastor

First time I've thought about buying a house

It's a good time to think about priorities; to get first things first.
First Things First

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at Knox Presbyterian Church on November 3, 1985, the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost: Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:33-48; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34.

In the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

There's a story in the Gospels of a lawyer who'd been listening to some discussions 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 they set for him. The lawyer decided *he* would ask Jesus a question. "Which commandment is first of all?" And our Lord's answer was: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is the only Lord; love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

In recent years the church has tended to lose sight of that first commandment and has put all its emphasis on the second- "Love your neighbour as yourself." Some branches of the church have become almost humanistic in their disregard of God and theology and the means of grace, insisting that the *only* relevant form of Christianity is one that's involved in political action and community service. Love for neighbor *is* important. Next to love for God it's the *most* important thing in our Christian faith. But it's not the most important. In fact, I think that a look at history will show that unless our love for neighbor grows out of our love for God it won't be long before our love for neighbor will go the way of all flesh and we'll be left with nothing but love for self.

We need to put first things first. The first and greatest commandment is a whole-hearted love for God. Let's take a look at the words that Jesus uses to describe how we are to love God. In Hebrew thought ~~forms~~ the heart involved, not only the emotions, but the mind and will as well. So when God tells us that we are to love him with all our heart, it ^{or whole-heartedly} *includes* loving God with our minds, with our souls, and with our strength.

a whole-hearted love for God involves

First, ~~we're to love God whole heartedly with~~ our *minds*. John Wesley once received a letter from a pious person 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, "Your letter received, and I may say in reply that your letter was superfluous, as I already *know* that the Lord could do without my learning. I wish to say that, while the Lord *does not* direct me to tell you, yet I feel impelled to tell you on my own responsibility that the Lord does not need your ignorance either."

Some Christians disparage the mind. They feel that if you're too smart you're liable to 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 all his mind. He used his mind to explain the Christian faith to millions of men and women through his books.

~~We don't have to be scholars like Lewis to love God with our minds.~~

The first duty of all of us is to love God with our minds. There are all sorts of ways we can love God with our minds. Use your mind to discuss the sermon with someone after the service. Buy a simple commentary and read it along with the Bible. Read Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Attend the Sunday morning church school classes ~~that are taught so well by Paul Reese~~. Ask questions about the world, science, ethics, politics as they relate to Christian faith. ^{Think about those lyrics to the music you listen to & relate it to your faith.} Do a little research to find answers. Our God is a God of truth. We don't need to fear truth. All truth is God's truth no matter where it's found. All truth can help us love God with our minds. A

whole-hearted love for God involves our minds. ^{One of the exciting things I discovered about you as a church is that you have a tradition of loving God with your minds. This church was the moving force behind the founding of Lincoln University. The tradition lives on in your church.}

Secondly, God wants us to love him with our *emotions*. ^{not the heart,} In biblical school classes and ^{study groups,} thinking the *soul* is the seat of the emotions. A whole-hearted love for

God includes our feelings. Imagine a young man on his knees before a beautiful young woman. "Will you marry me?"; he implores. She responds,

"Why do you want to marry me." He calmly replies, "A computer matched us up." I doubt if she'll be too impressed with such a cold, intellectual reason. 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. True love is an emotional thing that issues in poetry and song.

God wants us to love him with our emotions. Of course, we don't manufacture the emotion of love; it's a response to the One who's altogether lovely. Leonard Griffith of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Toronto tells the story of a Roman Catholic priest who told his congregation that he was going to preach about 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 Saviour. 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. The congregation sat and wept. Their emotions had been stirred, as God intended his love to stir human emotion.

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

A whole-hearted love for God involves our feelings. *John Mackay spoke of the need of having intellects on fire... a warm ardor that not only believes & thinks the right things but feels great love for God that sets the world on fire.*

Thirdly, we need to love God with our *strength*. That means we love God with *the strength of* our wills and put our love to work. Here's where a whole-hearted love for God *begins to* overlap with love for neighbor. Jesus said that when we show love to one of the least of his brothers or sisters we show love to him. When we receive a child in his name we actually receive him. When we love others in concrete ways we are loving God with our strength.

Loving God with all our strength works out in different ways with different people. You may visit shut-ins, run errands, volunteer at the

Urban Christian Ministries or the City Mission, tutor an international student, help a refugee, ^{or} work for ^{peace &} nuclear disarmament. ^{be an advocate for} You may spend your vacation using your vocational skill at some mission station around the world. ^{A friend of mine back in Buffalo is a nurse,} Some of you may know Bonnie Dahl, a member of North Presbyterian church. ^{that got back from} She's a nurse. She's in Honduras for two weeks of vacation using her nursing skills to minister to the sick and poor. She's loving God with her strength. A whole-hearted love for God includes our strength and our wills.

Jesus said that the first and greatest commandment is to love God whole-heartedly. ^{Not includes loving God with our minds, our emotions, our wills,} But so often we want to love God with only a part of ourselves. That's like flying in a 3 engine jet with only one engine working.

^{Last summer} I heard the story of an older Scottish couple who were flying to the states for the first time. ^{→ Ian Pitt Watson, at the Princeton Inst. of Theology, told} They were travelling on a three-engined DC-10.

When they were about 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. I want to assure you that this poses no threat to our safety. The DC-10 is designed to fly safely with only two of its engines. I do regret, however, that we'll be in the air a little longer than planned and will be arriving at Kennedy airport in New York one hour late. About 20 minutes later the voice of the pilot again came over the loud speaker. "There is no cause for alarm, however, I want you to know that a second engine is no longer functioning. I want to assure you that this plane is perfectly capable of flying with only one engine. Since we must fly at a slower rate of speed, however, we will be in the air an additional 4 hours." The old Scotsman turned to his wife and said with some irritation in his voice, "I do hope that third engine doesn't go out on us. We'll be up here all night if it does."

The point of this 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. But if my love for God isn't *felt* deeply and *acted out* in the way I live, I'll have only a cold, dry, fossilized orthodoxy that will be little comfort to me 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. 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.} We don't get anything out of worship unless our emotions have been moved to laugh or cry or feel guilty and fearful. But felt love isn't enough. Our feelings are so fickle. If we try to love God with our feelings alone we'll be sunk if our feelings fail. Or ^{A church simply can't ply on the one engine of emotion.} sometimes we try to keep our love airborne on the engine of the will alone. We run ourselves ragged in feverish religious activities or community involvement. We work hard at overcoming sin and temptation in our lives. And that's all good. But if that's the *only* engine that's keeping our love for God soaring, we're led back to the works of the law, to legalism, duty and self-righteousness.

*Feelings - 2000 flow
like fire*

God wants our love for him to soar on three engines: ^{as individuals, as a church,} A whole-hearted love of God involves the mind, the emotions and the will. 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 put first things first in our lives today as we come to the Lord's ^{we make important} ~~Table?~~ ^{decisions about this church. Let's begin the year} ~~Table?~~ ^{Begin The New Year, + hopefully a new pastoral relationship} ~~Table?~~ ^{the mind, the emotions and the will. Come to the table with the words of}

Francis Ridley Havergal in your hearts,

Take my love- my God, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store;
Take myself- and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.

Amen