

Matt 22:34

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Sermon: Save Daddy the Big Piece of Chicken!

Past week had a phone call from Nanci Hutson at the News Times - she was writing an article about the plan at St. John's to have a worship service on Sunday evenings as an alternative to Sunday mornings. Nanci wrote:

NEW MILFORD -- The Sabbath day for many Christians has become so crowded with sports, scouts and weekend work duties that some families want alternatives to the traditional morning worship service. Then there are those families whose only time to relax and enjoy each other's company is on Sundays. Or those who don't want to be tied to one particular denomination or theology. The Rev. Gail Keeney-Mulligan of St. John's Episcopal Church on the Green wants to offer all those individuals and families a nontraditional evening service that celebrates religious diversity.

In a letter to her parishioners, Keeney-Mulligan said "As I have observed the fast-changing and crazy life schedules of so many people today, and see more and more people working Sunday mornings, or -- after working a long hard week -- treasuring the Sabbath time of Sunday, I think it is time we tried a Sunday evening service, a service that would be for all people regardless of their Christian tradition or culture."

Longtime parishioner Bidy Roger said she agrees, particularly for young families with children involved in youth sports and other activities on Sundays. Their schedules might interfere with them coming to church in the morning.

"I wish them God's blessing," said the Rev. Matthew Yukon of Northville Baptist Church. In general, Yukon said, he believes people appreciate options whether in their "brand of toothpaste or their church."

The Rev. Michael Moran of First Congregational said his church has offered evening services tied to special events but has not yet seen a driving need to make them part of the regular worship schedule. Moran knows there are now more demands on families' Sunday time, yet he endorses the notion that attending a Sunday morning service prioritizes the worship of God.

I think our scripture lesson this morning is about priorities, about getting down to fundamentals: 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

This Sunday - the last Sunday in October - is our observance of Reformation Sunday - marking the movement that was sparked by Martin Luther when he nailed his 95 Thesis to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517.

Luther passionately urged the church to jettison all the extraneous baggage that had accumulated over the centuries, to consider once again the fundamentals of faith and grace, and to make bold decisions about the priorities that would reflect the mind of Christ and how could they best be implemented and observed.

One of the priorities the reformers settled on was proper observance of the Sabbath. They got rid of the Calendar of Saints and the Feast Days, the Holy Days, the optional memorials, the obligatory memorials, the solemnities, the seasons of Advent, Lent, and Pentecost - they even eliminated Christmastide,

because they could not find it confirmed in the scriptures. But what they did find in scripture, and what they set as their first priority and sole religious observance was the Sabbath - which they set as Sunday morning for two reasons.

One, it was in the early hours on the first day of the week that the women went to the tomb and first heard the message: He is not here, he is risen.

Two, by giving the first hours of the new week to God, and by bringing the first fruits of their labor as an offering in their worship, they were setting their priorities by the pattern of their lives.

When we give the first hour of the week to God in worship, when we give the first hour of our wages to the church for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor, we also set a pattern for our lives - we also set our priorities and proclaim our faith in word and deed.

'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

God should not have to beg to get his due. Not long ago I heard Chris Rock talk about his father, how we left the house early each morning and worked all day long to support his family; how he come in at night, bone tired from a day's labor and what was all he asked for? The big piece of chicken at dinner!

Rock said, "My mamma would kill us if one of us ate the big piece of chicken by accident! "

Then he told what his mamma would do if one of the children ate that big piece of chicken: What?? You ate the big piece of chicken! Oh, lord no! Now I gotta sew up some chicken! Give me two wings and a pork chop, daddy won't know the difference!

Well, Chris Rock got a big laugh, but you knew that underneath it all he really recognized that it was fundamentally fair that his father's reward for working all day to support his family should be the big piece of chicken. And his children should not be inconsiderate in observing that simple sign of respect.

We gather in church in the first hours of the first day of the week as a simple sign of respect. Worship is not a product like toothpaste, it's not an entertainment to help us forget our troubles, it's not even an activity designed to offer us improvement, knowledge, inspiration, or solace. It's an exercise of giving thanks, of showing respect, of setting a pattern and establishing priorities so that we don't forget who we are, where we came from, where we're heading, and who gets the big piece of chicken.