

Essentialism: The Essence

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on October 29, 2017
on Matthew 22:34-46 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

If you happened to be in worship back on the first Sunday of May, you may have experienced something you never anticipated would happen in church! As the congregation departed from worship, our ministers stood at the doors and gave a \$50 bill to every person or family unit there that day. There were only two instructions: "go and live neighborly, and then tell us your story!" Some of you looked at me incredulously when I told you what was coming, thinking I must have lost my ever-loving mind! A few of you comedians joked with us at the door, confessing your plan to go out all three doors and collect enough for a nice steak dinner! Others of you were already stressed: "Man, this is a lot of responsibility you're asking of us!" you said. A handful of you were already stoked and creative — you had a zillion ideas, and it was going to be hard to choose! We even got a beautiful response from Cathy, a TV viewer, who was inspired to do the same with her own \$50!¹

With a deadline of August 31 to complete your task, so many of you found a creative, meaningful way to build relationships with your actual neighbors at home, at work, or downtown. Laura and Gary/Jill/Hannah/Norah/Micah hosted friendly social gatherings for all the folks in their

¹ As written in an email to our church from May 12, 2017.

neighborhood and had great turnouts! Amy and Kelly, Diane, and Hoyt and Mary each had significant conversations with people they either met or knew minimally from restaurants they frequent, and shared a meal together with a new neighbor. Bob and Phyllis, and Bob and Patricia donated to organizations that do meaningful work with neighbors.

A few of you shared love with our downtown neighbors! Carl and Donnie, Benny and Mary Ann, and Mary Nell all pooled their money to take \$5 Starbucks gift cards to each person at the Fire Station just over off 6th Street, thanking them for their service to our community. Mary Lib and Nancy prepared 60 goodie for the employees at the newly-renovated Central Library just down the street, welcoming them back to the neighborhood upon the occasion of their grand opening in August with bags bursting with color and warmth. And dozens upon dozens of cupcakes arrived here for our amazing staff of the Children's Center, baked with love from Sheree, Kim, Cindi, and Joanne.

You've been 'living neighborly,' church, and I see you! What a joy it's been to hear how these simple and inexpensive moments of kindness and hospitality have bound you up more closely with your neighbors, even ones that don't look or act or vote or love like you do. Well done, friends! I hope you'll take a moment on your way out today to read some of these stories in the hallway across from the Commons, and feel encouraged by them!

Nearly six months later, the culture in which we're living neighborly continues to shift at a dizzying pace. Since you left here with \$50 in your

hands, we've seen white supremacists marching with Nazi flags openly in the streets. We've been horrified by the worst mass shooting in American history. Hurricanes and earthquakes and wildfires have destroyed the lives and homes of those in Texas, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Mexico, California, and the Caribbean. The floodgates have opened, and millions of women all over the world are speaking up about the harassment and abuse they've suffered at the hands of men. And I confess — on my least hopeful days, this causes me to wonder: *how in the world are we supposed to live neighborly in such an environment?*

2017 certainly wasn't Jesus's context, but I believe his words in today's gospel reading can give us a helpful word when we feel hopeless. We remain in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem in a triumphant procession fit for a king. But the religious and political conflict simmered, and authorities openly conspired together to eliminate the threat. Circling the wagons, our text tells us that Pharisees and Sadducees gathered together to test him. A lawyer pipes up: "Teacher, which of the commandments in the law is the greatest?" sure that Jesus was trapped. The question posed to Jesus was, quite simply, "what's most important? What's the very essence of the faith? What is absolutely essential to God?"

I've been on a reading kick recently, hungry for conversation partners and ideas that help me think more meaningfully about the patterns and practices of my life — everything from time management, to work/life balance, to parenting, to health, you name it. One such recent

read is called *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, by Greg McKeown. McKeown identifies the realities of the modern workforce, where people are overworked but underutilized, oppressively busy but seem to never be in control of one's schedule. The answer, he says, is essentialism: "a disciplined, systematic approach for determining where our highest point of contribution lies, then making execution of those things almost effortless." Thus, the Essentialist "deliberately distinguishes the vital few from the trivial many, eliminates the nonessentials, and then removes obstacles so the essential things have clear, smooth passage."²

Unlike Martin Luther and his 95 Theses that we remember on this Reformation Sunday, McKeown isn't writing an instruction manual for the Christian faith. But I do think we Christians and church can learn from his basic exhortation to identify the essentials and relentlessly pursue them, so our expressions of faith can be shaped by what matters most. Frankly, Jesus sounds like an Essentialist in his answer a tricky question! In it, he stakes out theological ground and states clearly that loving God and loving neighbor are absolutely essential, the very essence of what it means to follow Jesus.

Martin Luther understood this essence. In his 1520 treatise commonly called "The Freedom of a Christian," he famously wrote "A

² Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, p7.

Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything; a Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all."³

And some 500 years later, journalist David Brooks understands the essence. He wrote this week in his regular column at *The New York Times* an essay called "How to Engage a Fanatic."⁴ In it, he observes, as many of us do, the rise of hyper-partisanship, of outrage, of finger-pointing and screaming, of deep fissures in the fabric of the American experiment. When we are pushed to the brink, this reality can show up as fanaticism — a passion for some thing or idea so intense that bedrock principles of logic or civility expressed towards people on the other side just seem to go out the window with every click, post, tweet, or snap. Lest we assume fanatics are "them" and those who represent the most abhorrent elements of human nature, you and I both know that fanatics span the range: every color, every religious tradition, every worldview, every age, every gender, every political opinion, every team. Fanaticism is everywhere: filling college football stadiums on Saturdays and houses of worship on Sundays, marching in the streets, clogging comment sections and message boards across the internet, fueling the rise and the resources of Right and Left-leaning news agencies, even splashed a little too close to home on the front page of our paper!

³ As quoted in the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America's (ELCA) materials marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation: <https://www.elca500.org/about/observance/>

⁴ David Brooks, "How to Engage a Fanatic," *The New York Times*, 10/23/17, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/opinion/engaging-fanatics.html>

Researcher Brene Brown has observed this trend too. She calls it 'sorting,' the growing human tendency to flock geographically, politically, even spiritually towards like-minded groups of people. When we sort ourselves, it leads us to make assumptions about those not in the flock, which in turn fuels disconnection. With our flock, we read the same articles, engage the same media, watch the same TV shows, and even live in the same neighborhoods. In 1976, less than 25% of Americans lived in locations where the presidential election was a landslide in their county; but in 2016, some 80% of us lived in locations where the election was a landslide! When our neighbors, those beside whom we live and learn and love, are simply those who agree with us, it's no surprise that we've divided and fractured! But what's notable, Brown says, is that this rise in sorting hasn't led to an increase in feelings of belonging, but rather a significant and widespread rise in loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and fear.⁵

So in these troubled times, exactly how *are* we to love those with whom we disagree? How *are* we to engage a fanatic, one that could be across the aisle, across the picket line, or even across our family's Thanksgiving table? How are we to counteract that loneliness and isolation, anxiety and fear? Is there any hope, any essential truth we can nail to the wall and give us direction? The answer, agrees David Brooks

⁵ Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, p51-60.

and Brene Brown and Martin Luther and Jesus, is as simple as it is terribly difficult: **love**. Love!

#1: Love God — Get to know God through prayer and scripture and worship and people. Shape your life — your patterns and practices — according to God's dream for it. Identify with gratitude God's abundant gifts in your life. Hunger for a lasting, nourishing relationship with the one we call Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Look at who God calls beloved, and love them too.

#2: Love neighbor — Listen to understand, not to defend. Deeply care about the lives of those whose lifestyle, political view, or passion you do not share. Spend time together, ride bikes together, share meals together, sacrifice for each other. As Brene Brown says, "people are hard to hate close up. Move in!"⁶ Look at who God calls beloved, and love them too.

Love God with your whole self. Love your neighbor in the very same way you hope to be loved.⁷ "On these two commandments," Jesus says, "hang all the law and the prophets." This is it! This is the most important rule of them all. This is the essence of what matters most to God. This is essential to live one's life within the dream, the will, the hope of God. This is what it means to follow Christ. This, of course, is the essence that would

⁶ Brown, p63.

⁷ David Lose, "Matthew 22:34-40," *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2*, p203.

lead our Lord first to an old rugged cross on a hill faraway. And this is the essential that looks profoundly like an open tomb.

There's no doubt that loving God and neighbor is core to living an individual Christian life. But beyond that, I wonder — what might it look like for us as a church to keep this essential, essential? First Baptist, we stand on the precipice of the type of change that happens once in a generation. Only one of the four of us ministers was here even three years ago. Buildings through which we have done ministry for decades will come down. Dollars allocated for ministries and missions have shifted and will continue to shift as new needs arise and others fall away. Ministries that have defined us in the community are coming to a close. These are the moments where our fear and anxiety about what the future holds can cause **us** to circle the wagons, hunker down, sort and isolate, and plow through with fear and anxiety, regardless of what comes our way.

But for such a time as this, we hear again the steady, simple reminder: love God, love each other, love yourself. And with that in mind, we add our voices into this cultural moment and thus encourage one another to open. Soften. Dream. Vision. See. Notice. Hear. Listen. Care. Move in. All across our country and our world, there are such few spaces that remain where we actually can come together from every walk and way of life; the church - our church! - is a vital place to do just that.

Starting this Wednesday, we will spend the month of November discerning and listening and visioning together about who God is calling us

to be and what God is calling us to do. Our shared story as a church has transformed countless lives: ourselves, our neighbors, our downtown community, and many more. That history is like the pair of proverbial shoulders upon which we will stand, in the hopes that God gives us the eyes to see and ears to hear — deeper and further and wider than ever before, **for the sake of Love!** And as we do so, my prayer is that we keep the essentials, essential; that loving God and loving neighbor, the very essence of our faith, is anchored right smack dab in the middle of whoever we are and whatever we do next.

You may not leave here today with a \$50 bill and an instruction to live neighborly. But we *will* leave here today with our hands and hearts wrapped firmly around the essentials and an instruction to love neighborly. Just imagine what stories we might tell next!