

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 5, 2010 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Ezekiel 11:19-20, and Ephesians 4:17-32

BECOMING RESPONSIVE

To be human is not merely to exist and possess the peculiar features of humankind — the large brain, opposable thumb, power of speech, and capability of reflection on the meaning of our existence — but to be commanded to become what Another wants us to be. We are not simply made or born human but commanded to take part in our own becoming human.¹ Jesus summed up God’s commandments by pairing the two greatest: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Everything Jesus wants taught and understood about the commanded life of God’s people hangs from the pegs of these two great commandments, and any obedience not derived from love for God and love for the other person who is our neighbor is false obedience and does not serve God’s desire for human life.

God’s commands create. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God calls into being what was not. Light, however, obeys God’s command simply by doing what light does. It shines, illumines, and travels really, really fast. Light never thinks: “I’m sick and tired of doing the same day after day, and so I’m going to strike out on my own and do what I want. I’m the fastest thing around. Why should I keep doing somebody else’s bidding? It’s my life, and I’ll do it my way.” Light lacks both intelligence and that most dangerous of God’s gifts to us which we call the *will*. Light does not truly obey God because light cannot choose to disobey.

We can disobey and defy God. But God does not want obedience for its own sake. God does not make us slaves. Jesus counts it as success when he can tell his disciples they are no longer his servants but his friends because they know his mind and share his purpose willingly. God comes to us, not with power to coerce, but with vulnerable compassion. That’s why Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish philosopher and teacher who describes human being as *commanded life*, warns us, “. . . when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion — its message becomes meaningless.”²

What does it mean to love God, whom we cannot see or touch, prove to our skeptical friends, or prove to ourselves in the dark nights of our doubts, fears, and disappointments? How can we love God? Often we have dealt with that question by jumping to the more tangible second commandment to love our neighbor. The First Letter of John assures us we

cannot love God whom we have never seen if we will not love the sister or brother we do see³, but even with that strong element of truth behind it, jumping right to the second commandment is a dodge and a dangerous one because, if I am not careful, I will take charge of what it means to love my neighbor and decide exactly which people I will regard as my neighbors and how I will “love” them and when. The human *will to autonomy* is quick to push God out of the freedom God gives us.

What is love for God? I believe it begins and progresses as *responsiveness* to God’s love for us. The world always tries to make God a thing — the greatest of all things, the greatest thing imaginable — but still a thing. The Bible insists God is Person not thing, idea, or myth. The Bible expresses scant interest in God’s being as such but great passion for God’s love, justice, and desire for human redemption from the emptiness of unloved and unloving life. The Bible insists that God cares far beyond all human caring, that God will not stop caring and leave us alone, and that God lives toward the day when all of us will respond willingly, freely, and joyously. It is true that God gauges our responses by the way we treat our neighbor, but God is the one who loves us, who longs to be our God, and who commands us to be human and live as God’s people.

So, religious people may ask, “How do I love God?” but other people ask, “How can I believe God loves me?” God sent Jesus as the living answer to that question, and Jesus sends us to continue to be living answers to that question. Because of us, people should be enabled to believe God loves them.

Abraham Heschel offers us a challenging image I shared with the Session Thursday evening. He writes:

There are dead thoughts and there are living thoughts. A dead thought has been compared to a stone which one may plant in the soil. Nothing will come out. A living thought is like a seed. In the process of thinking, an answer without a question is devoid of life. It may enter the mind; it will not penetrate the soul. It may become a part of one’s knowledge; it will not come forth as a creative force.⁴

As followers of Jesus, as Christ’s church in this age of confusion about what matters in life and what value and hope life holds for us, we need to stop planting stones and plant seeds. We cannot go on giving people answers to questions they have not been moved to ask.

What are people asking? They are, we are told, asking to be soothed and entertained.⁵ The passion running through our society is anger that builds into rage. We feel alive by getting angry. Otherwise, we chase the dull stars of relaxation, entertainment, and

amusement. Descartes famously followed the process of doubting until he arrived at the bare conclusion, “I think, therefore I am,” but as a society, we are moving toward the conclusion, “I’m angry, therefore I feel alive.”

I know a man almost my age who awoke one morning and felt no physical pain. For a few minutes, he lay in bed wondering, “Did I die?” Then, he felt some pain return to his body and knew he was still alive. So, he got up and went to work. These days, I fear, many people feel truly alive and energized only when they are angry or afraid, and since we human beings like to feel in control, they choose anger and pump it into the negative vitality of rage.

I can tell you each week from the pulpit and thereby tell myself, “God loves you, loves you more than you can begin to fathom.” It’s true. But my telling you so is not enough. You need to seek God’s love and keep seeking, knocking, questioning. Please allow yourself the human honesty to look more deeply into yourself and ask the disturbing, sometimes painful questions of the meaning of your life: not “How long can I live or how comfortably?” but “Why do I live?” and “How can I live so my life matters to me and to those who love me, starting with God?” Please begin with the assumption that you are not here just to produce for someone else’s riches and to be entertained between shifts of work. Thinking is not wasting time, but squandering excessive amounts of time on entertainments and superficial chitchat to avoid thinking is wasting life.

I start becoming more human as I let myself realize I am not in control of life, which is not my possession but God’s gift to me. But be careful. Christianity has sometimes wallowed in that realization to the point of being proud of being pathetic. God did not create us to despise ourselves, feel helpless, and sound pitiful. Calvinism in particular has wallowed in false humility to the point of communicating, “I’m worthless and proud of it.” That’s not grace, or faith, or anything that could possibly enable us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

We need, not only to let ourselves ask our deeper questions, but to dig down and find them. In the busyness of our days and exhaustion of our nights, we have put questions of life’s meaning on hold, and if they pop up, we tamp them down again. For most of us, though, such avoidance cannot last. Time will eventually force us to ask those questions of life’s meaning, but in fear and disappointment rather than in faith and a hope that can survive our losses. Now is the time to seek and to ask. To be human and truly alive is to be *responsive to God’s love for us*, and then go on and become responsive to God’s love for that sister or brother, that neighbor, that outcast, and even that enemy. The greatest truth about you, the decisive truth without which there is no truth about you, is that God loves you. That’s the starting point, and it will always be the starting point for each new day. For God’s love never ends. Amen.

Notes

1. See Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, Stanford University Press, pp. 111, 112.
2. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: a Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 3.
3. I John 4:19, 20.
4. *God in Search of Man*, pp. 3, 4.
5. G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Congregations Gone Wild," *New York Times*, August 7, 2010:
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08macdonald.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=congregations%20gone%20wild&st=cse