

## From the Pastor

I read a book a long time ago, back in my Divinity School days, entitled, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*. It was written by a fellow named H. Richard Niebuhr with some help from a couple of his colleagues. What did this fellow and his friends say that the purpose of the church is? They said that the purpose of the church is the promotion of the love of God and the love of neighbor. The church is to promote among people these two loves.

These two loves: When Jesus was asked by some experts in the law which is the greatest commandment in that law, he replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Like I said, I read that book a long time ago. A long, long time ago. I’ve been in this being a pastor “business” for quite a while since then. I’ve served churches in big cities, small towns, and even one in the middle of a cornfield. I’ve served in a larger church, in a few small ones, and in some mid-size churches. I’ve served churches in the north, the south, the east, and the west. I’ve been around the block a few times. But I keep coming back to what this Niebuhr fellow wrote in that book. I have not come up with a better answer to the question, “What is the purpose of the church?”

Sure, a church in the middle of a cornfield will set different goals for itself than a church in the big city. And a small church may come up with a different kind of mission statement than a larger church. And a church in the eastern part of the country will do things differently than a church out there in crazy California. But each one, attempting in its own way to be faithful, will end up trying to promote, in its own way, these two loves: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

I think it is important for people in churches to talk about God, sing about God, and pray to God. It is important to talk about, sing about, and pray to God who is worthy of our love, who is lovely. This is maybe more difficult to do in this day and age, for all kinds of reasons, than it has been in the church’s past. But I think it can be done. And it needs to be done. I try to talk about the greatness and power of God. And I try to talk about the beauty, goodness, and love of God. I try to talk about these things especially as these are made known to us in Jesus Christ. I try to talk about God, who is worthy of a human being’s love, of your love and mine, of any human being’s love.

As we talk and sing about God, who is most worthy of our love, as we pray to God most lovely, something happens to us. As we come to love God—God, whose goodness and love falls like the rain and shines like the sun upon us all—we come to love what God loves. We learn to love as God loves. Sure, we will be better at it some days than other days, but we will come to love our neighbors. We will learn to love our neighbors.

None of this is easy in this day and age and for all kinds of reasons. But, in this day and age, I cannot think of anything more necessary, more needed. Maybe especially in these times is it important to promote these two loves: the love of God, who is most worthy of our love, and the love of one neighbor for another.

Pastor Neal